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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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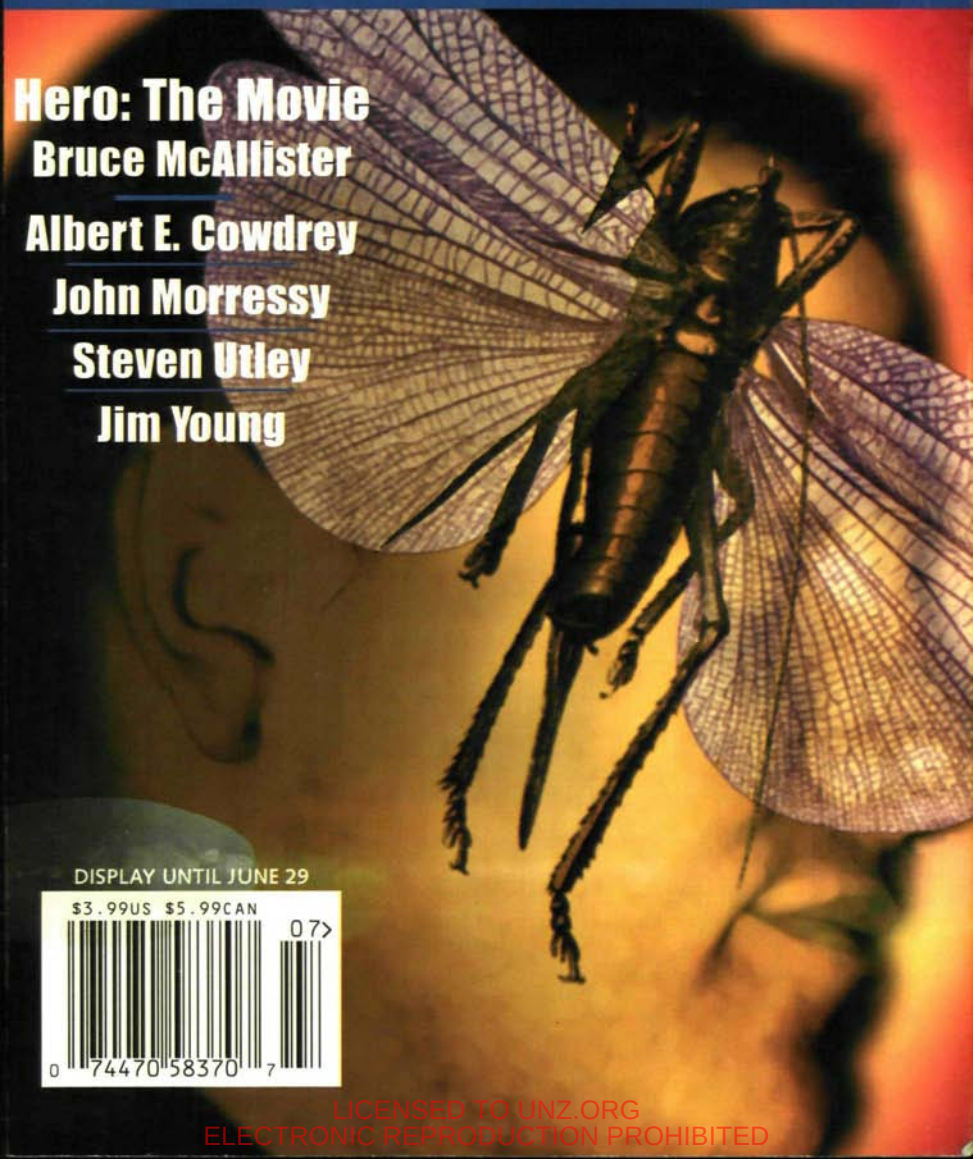

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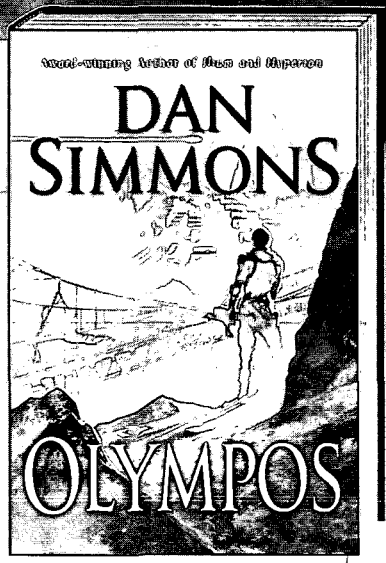

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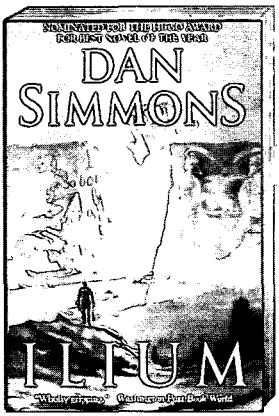

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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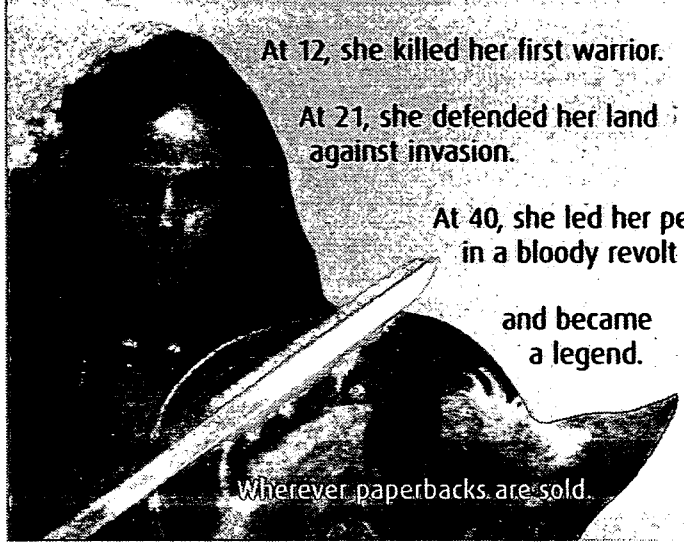

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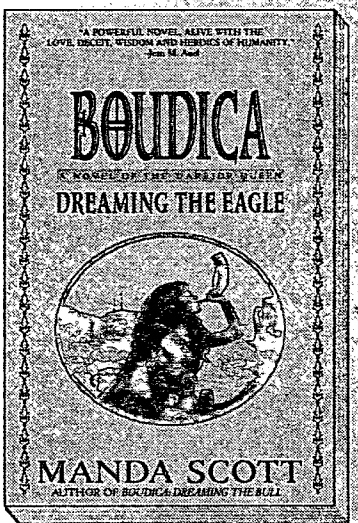
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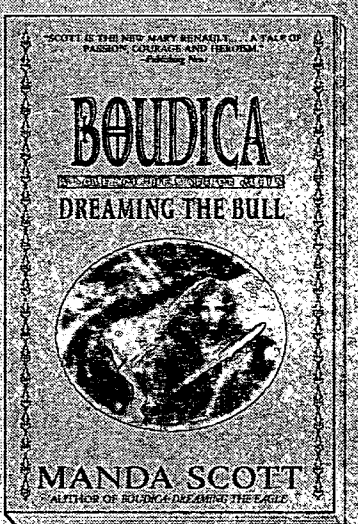
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This issue kicks off with a new tale of the wizard Kedrigern, whose last appearance in our pages was in the April 2004 issue ("The Unpleasantness at Le Château Malveillant"). This time out, the wizard and his fair lady find themselves caught in a twisty tale of knights and honor.

Mr. Morressy reports that he's currently polishing up a trio of novels about Kedigern's youth and apprenticeship—the books appeared previously in the Czech Republic but have never been published in English. They'll make up the fourth volume of The Kedrigern Chronicles.

The Tournament at Surreptitia

By John Morressy

O what can ail thee, Knight at arms,
So haggard and so woebegone?
— John Keats

THE MAN IN THE GRAY cloak looked down from the height of his gray steed. "I must have your help, wizard," he said.

Kedrigern looked up at him, his expression noncommittal. "What's the problem? Spell? Enchantment? Curse?"

"A matter of honor," said the rider. His voice had the timbre of an instrument best suited to roaring. At the moment, however, it was lowered as if against eavesdroppers, though none were likely. Only Kedrigern, the rider, and an amiable-looking youth whom Kedrigern took to be his squire were present on the road before the wizard's cottage.

"Honor, is it?"

"Honor," the rider repeated.

Kedrigern felt an immediate twinge of doubt. He had great respect for

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honor and honorable conduct and strove to practice it himself, but he had encountered too many who placed an unhealthy interpretation on the term. His contacts with honorable men had left the word sullied with connotations of inflated self-esteem, wounded pride, maniacal pursuit of glory, hypersensitivity to imagined affronts, and irresistible peer pressure leading to blood and mayhem, usually over a trifle forgotten by the time the principals met to flail away at one another or lay waste great stretches of inoffensive landscape and murder innocent animals and peasants by the score. The word made him uncomfortable.

"I have received a challenge," said the rider.

It was as Kedrigern had feared. He stepped back, folded his arms, and studied his visitor. He was a big man, solidly built. A florid complexion and bristly black beard gave him an air of controlled ferocity. Bulges beneath his cloak suggested that he was well armed and the lances and dented shield carried by his squire attested to experience in the field. Even in this brief exchange of polite words, he displayed the constant watchfulness of the experienced warrior.

"You look well able to take care of yourself," said the wizard.

"I am." The low growl lent emphasis to the assertion.

Kedrigern continued to scrutinize him in silence for a moment and then said, "I don't believe in conferring unfair advantage. I take no man's side unless his opponent is already committed to using magic. Is that the case?"

"I have been assured that it is not."

"Then you've come to the wrong wizard. If you'd like to refresh yourself and water the horses, you're welcome. I can offer you and your squire something to eat and a place for the night, but I can't assist you."

"I have not come to beg for magical assistance in battle, nor am I in need of sustenance or of shelter," the man said, his voice louder. He sprang from his mount with a nimbleness surprising in one of his size and flung back his cloak. "Do I look like a weakling? A coward? A trickster?" he roared. The question was patently rhetorical; he had a chest like a hogshead and forearms like barrels. His scarred hands were the size of platters. Yet for all his bellicose appearance, there was a frankness and dignity in his expression that bespoke decency, however misguided.

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"Not at all. You look like a man who prefers to emerge from combat alive, with honor intact."

Somewhat mollified, the rider said, "So I am. And by the strength of my good right arm and the righteousness of my cause, I have always done so. But I require your help all the same."

"Now you puzzle me. How, exactly, do you wish me to help?"

"I require information. I have been summoned to take part in a tournament at the castle of Flenbrudius, Prince of Surreptitia."

Kedrigern thought for a moment, frowned, and said, "Never heard of him."

"His kingdom lies on the plain of Sarpor, by the Sea of Dijjijji, in the shadow of Coromondura, Mountain of Eternal Snows."

After a further moment's searching of his memory, Kedrigern shook his head. "Never heard of them, either."

The rider heaved a deep sigh. "Nor did I, before the challenge arrived. Nor has any man, woman, or child I have yet spoken to. I have consulted sages and scholars, traders and travelers, and all answer me as you did. Therein lies my problem. I must find Flenbrudius and his kingdom and enter the lists before his castle by dawn on Midsummer Day or appear a recreant and a coward before the world. And the appointed day draws ever nearer."

Kedrigern was growing interested in spite of himself. "Why? Who presented this challenge?"

"Why, I know not. The message was delivered by a white vulture carrying a scroll in its talons."

Kedrigern's interest grew. "An arresting method of communication. I'd like to meet the sender. I have no objection to helping you, sir knight, but I don't see what I can do. You don't want my magic, and geography is not one of my specialties."

In the glum silence that followed his words a lady entered the dooryard where the conversation had been taking place. She was a dark-haired lady of great beauty, dressed simply and elegantly in a gown of deep green and gold, wearing a golden circlet around her brows. The appearance of such a fair damsel in any company was certain to be greeted by a sigh and a chivalrous salute from every male present; and so it was on this occasion, but only after the rider, having given a sudden start, had regained

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his composure. His squire simply stared in appreciative wonder. Their reaction was doubly understandable: the lovely lady had made her entrance on gossamer wings that glimmered like crystal in the morning sunlight.

"I hope I'm not interrupting. I heard voices...," she said as she touched lightly down, allowing a dazzling smile to complete the thought.

"Not at all, my dear." Turning to the rider, Kedrigern said, "May I present my wife, Princess? And you, sir, are...?"

"Drurich, Marshal of Pungloon, my lady. And my squire, Sidrie."

"Delighted to meet you," said Princess, waving her hand to the squire and then extending it to Drurich. "I heard mention of a recreant and a coward. To whom were you referring?"

"A tournament is to be held in Surreptitia. If I do not appear in the lists at the appointed time, I will surely be branded a recreant and a coward."

"Then you must appear."

"I am willing, my lady. Nay, I am eager. But no one knows the way to Surreptitia."

"Do you mean to say that someone challenged you to appear at a tournament at the risk of shame and disgrace and did not give you clear directions?"

"No directions at all, my lady. Only a summons."

"That's shocking. We can't tolerate such goings on. You must find the way to Surreptitia," Princess said with a look of alarm.

Drurich bowed and said, "With the help of this goodly wizard I shall, my lady."

"The very thought...." She frowned, shook her head, and turned to Kedrigern. "What do you plan to do?"

"All I've been asked to do is discover where this combat is supposed to take place. Unfortunately, I'm not a geographer."

She brushed away his objection with an impatient gesture. "Well, obviously, the place is enchanted in some way. It's been hidden by magic means. You know all sorts of spells for finding unfindable things."

"I am not a poor man, wizard. To save my honor I will gladly give all I have," said Drurich.

Kedrigern had heard such protestations before, frequently accompanied by tears and poignant displays, and always from those hopeful of

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engaging his services. Once his work had been done, their pleas quickly changed to cries of penury and want, and accusations of gouging. He was unmoved. But he wavered when Princess said, "Think of it: a brave and honorable knight in peril of disgrace by a foul stratagem. You must help him."

"All I have, wizard," Drurich repeated. "Except, of course, my weapons, armor, horse, castle, lands, and necessary expenses for the journey. And decent provision for my wife and four daughters."

Princess floated to Kedrigern's side and gave him a woeful look. "Think of it. Disgrace. Shame. A good name ruined. A happy family destroyed. Honor lost."

"Oh, all right, all right," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

"And you must not charge the poor man. He has problems enough as it is, without your taking his money," she said. "He'll need every crown he has for his daughters' dowries."

"I don't work for nothing." Turning to Drurich, Kedrigern said, "Ordinarily, I would charge by the hour for something like this. But in view of the nature of your problem, and because no traveling is involved, I will take only two crowns."

"One would have been quite enough," said Princess, *sotto voce.*

In Kedrigern's mind, two crowns was a bargain price for a task that required extensive searching and the possibility that he might have to unlock potentially dangerous protective spells. Even three crowns would not have been excessive. But since all the work could be done at home, in his workroom, he deigned to be generous. Find the directions, work any necessary counterspells, collect his fee, and send Drurich on his way; no fuss, no inconvenience, and best of all, no traveling. This was an ideal commission.

Three days later he was of a different opinion. He had searched through his library and found not one solitary reference to Flenbrudius or his kingdom, and only a single sentence referring to the geographical landmarks mentioned by Drurich:

> *The plain of Sarpor, by the Sea of Dijjijji, in the shadow of Coromondura, Mountain of Eternal Snows, is hidden from men's eyes. No maps are known, nor travelers' accounts. Yet that place of sorrows exists, woe to him that seeks it.*

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Frustrated but more determined than ever, he persisted in his search and was rewarded at last by finding, bound in with a book of miscellaneous incantations, jests, recipes, humorous songs, and useful phrases in long-dead languages, a brief essay of considerable age entitled *Welcome to Surreptitia*. It told him little of present value, concentrating as it did on sites of interest and local attractions of a bygone age; but at least it provided directions, albeit vague ones: west to the sea, north along the coast to the Black Marsh, then east through the central of three mountain passes.

Once, many years before, he had heard of the Black Marsh. It was said to be a place to be avoided for reasons the speaker could not bear to mention.

He copied out his findings and made his way to the dooryard, where Spot had set up a pavilion and laid a table where he and Sidrie were serving lunch to Princess and Drurich. Settling into the chair Spot had placed for him, Kedrigern smiled in greeting and said, "I have directions for you, sir knight. They're not what I'd call detailed, but I think they'll get you there."

"Well done, wizard," said Drurich. "I knew you would not fail me."

Princess sprang up, threw her arms around Kedrigern's neck, and kissed him. "I'm proud of you. As soon as we finish lunch we can have Spot start packing, and be — "

"Packing?" said Kedrigern with a start.

"We can't let this poor man go off into the unknown where a malevolent wizard awaits."

"What malevolent wizard?" Kedrigern cried.

"My lady, I appreciate your concern, but — "

"Don't argue, Drurich," she said. Then to her husband, "I can't give you a name, but do you doubt the malevolence of someone who would summon a knight to a tournament and not provide directions? Such a wizard is liable to do anything. Drurich must be protected."

"But my lady, I am — "

"I know you're strong and I'm sure you're very brave, Drurich, but that means nothing against magic. You just finish your lunch and leave everything to us."

"My dear, I don't think you — " Kedrigern began.

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She silenced him with a look that would have frozen the Grand Falls at Hringle's Leap in the full spate of spring, rose from her place, and fluttered silently into the cottage. Wizard and knight exchanged a helpless glance, and Kedrigern shrugged. It was a matter of upbringing, he knew. Princess had a soft spot in her heart for kings and queens, princes and princesses, knights and ladies in difficulty. She was also soft on yeomen, serfs, and peasants, giants, dwarves, kindly witches, and well-behaved trolls, as well as birds, beasts, and non-stinging insects. Her wrath was reserved for those who were cruel to any of the aforementioned. She could hear a cry for help from a distance of a hundred leagues, and no cry went unheeded. Kedrigern sighed, and said, "We'll start packing after lunch."

THE JOURNEY ITSELF was no worse than most journeys until they reached the Black Marsh. But having made their way duly west and then north under sunny skies and pleasant temperatures, encountering friendly helpful folk along the way, resting in decent accommodations each night and eating palatable food each day, the grim prospect that opened so abruptly before them might have given pause to the most optimistic of travelers. Dark dead waters broken only by mounds of slimy black soil and the trunks of dead trees extended as far as they could see. This was not very far, for a dank mist lay heavily over the water, and a sullen breeze wafted the smell of decay to their offended nostrils. No sound, not even a distant splash, suggested the presence of life.

"The Black Marsh?" Princess asked.

"The Black Marsh," Kedrigern replied.

"And aptly named," growled Drurich.

Sidrie made a sickly face, covered his nose and mouth with his hands, and said nothing.

"My dear, would you go up and survey the situation? It would help to know how far this dismal waste extends," Kedrigern said.

"With pleasure. Perhaps the air is sweeter aloft," she replied, letting the cloak slip from her shoulders. She gave her wings a deliberate flutter to loosen them up after several days of rest, and flapped them slowly for a moment.

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"My lady...your wings...they are so delicate, so small," said Drurich. "Is it safe?"

She turned and smiled at him. Slowly she extended her arms above her, as if reaching out to the gray sky. Then she suddenly shot upward with the rushing whir of a pheasant breaking cover. She leveled off at treetop height and described a wide circle around them before ascending to vanish into the milky whiteness.

"Amazing," Drurich murmured.

"Yes. And very helpful when we're traveling," said Kedrigern. "I don't know how we managed before."

She was aloft only briefly. Alighting gracefully on her saddle and settling her cloak around her shoulders, she reported, "I could see nothing helpful. The mist just goes on and on. Once we enter, we might be in this place for months."

"Months?" Drurich repeated with alarm. "Then I would miss the appointed day, and my honor...."

"Don't worry," said Kedrigern. "How about going around it?"

Princess shook her head. "That might take even longer. It seems to extend to both sides as well as ahead."

"Here's a chance to use your power, wizard," said Drurich.

"I may have more pressing need for magic before this is over. Give me some time to think."

Kedrigern rode to the edge of the dark waters and dismounted. He hunkered down and looked in for as far as he could see, weighing possible solutions. He could think of very few, and every one of them required a large expenditure of magic. As he crouched in thought, he heard a sound from deep in the mist, a soft rippling, like the slow progress of a vessel through still waters. It drew nearer. He rose and saw a dark shape. As it came straight for where he stood, growing ever more distinct, he could make out the form of a barge, elegantly appointed, gliding smoothly over the dark water. It was large enough to bear a score of travelers and their horses without crowding. A generous cabin promised shelter and comfort.

The barge drew up to the shore and stopped. A broad gangway slid silently from its bow, but no crew appeared. Kedrigern drew out his medallion and examined the craft through the Aperture of True Vision. It had a completely neutral aura; plenty of magic, but not a hint of evil.

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The others rode to Kedrigern's side. In an awed voice, Drurich said, "Amazing, wizard. Brilliant!"

"It certainly is."

Sidrie gaped for a time, then cried, "Well done! Oh, very well done!" and immediately reddened and fell stone silent.

"How did you do it?" Princess asked.

He turned to them and said, "I didn't."

"You mean...someone sent it?" Drurich said.

"I mean just that. So much for the promise of no magical interference."

"Ah, no. The scroll promised only that there would be no magic in the combat. It did not refer to transportation." Kedrigern appeared unconvinced, and Drurich went on, "Surely, if this be magic it is of the helpful kind. Thanks to the timely appearance of this splendid vessel, I am certain to reach my destination by the appointed day."

"You may be right. It's definitely not wicked and it solves our most immediate problem." Kedrigern turned to Princess. "What do you think, my dear?"

"I don't see any alternative to boarding. But let's all remain alert."

The cabin was warm and dry and comfortably furnished. The air was fresh and mildly fragrant. All that day and the day and night following they proceeded smoothly and silently over the dark waters. The mist never lifted, never thinned sufficiently to allow a glimpse of their surroundings, but they were cozy in their cabin. Without oars or sail the barge moved on at steady speed. Invisible hands served sumptuous meals and provided every comfort, including pleasing music to accompany their dinners. The aura of magic was all around them, but it was a comfortable sort of magic.

After dinner on their first day aboard, an elegant set of chessmen made its appearance and they settled down to a little tournament, which Princess won handily, defeating every one of her companions with ease, even when they combined their skills against her.

"My lady is a mistress of the game," said Sidrie as he rose from the board after a crushing defeat.

"I have had much practice. Chess is the only athletic activity I was permitted in my youth."

Preparing for bed on their second night afloat, Princess said, "We're

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going to arrive at our destination tomorrow morning. I can feel it, can't you?"

"Yes. We'll land just after breakfast. We'd better eat hearty. No telling how long we'll have to wait for dinner. I'm going to work a cloaking spell on both of us before we arrive."

"Is that really necessary?"

"There's powerful magic involved in this affair, and I prefer to remain anonymous until we've had a chance to study the situation."

"But anyone capable of producing magic of this quality would be aware of a cloaking spell," Princess pointed out.

"And if he tried to penetrate it, we'd know."

They considered the point for a time, and at last Princess said, "All the magic so far has been helpful. Do you expect trouble?"

"I don't know what to expect. That's why I want to remain incognito as long as possible. We'll pose as friends of Drurich coming along to make certain all due protocol is observed."

"What about my wings?"

"Keep your cloak on at all times. If anyone asks, tell them it's the fashion at the court of Pungloon."

"They'll never believe that."

"Trust me, my dear. If I know courtiers, they'll all be wearing their cloaks round the clock by the second day."

No sooner had the invisible servants cleared the remains of a substantial breakfast than the barge slowed and pulled smoothly up to a dock, where it stopped. Lines whipped out to secure it, the gangway slid into place, and their horses, saddled and loaded, made their way ashore, led by unseen hands, and contentedly began to nibble the lush grass of the long greensward that led gently up to a magnificent castle. When the four passengers emerged from the cabin the mists still lay over the waters, but the sky was clear above the green and flowery Plain of Sarpor. The ragged line of a dark forest marked half the horizon. In the distance loomed a snow-capped peak that could only be Coromondura. The Sea of Dijjijji was nowhere in sight, but the glow on the southern horizon suggested to the travelers where it lay.

No sooner had Sidrie set foot on the green with the last of their baggage than the gangway slid silently back aboard, the lines slipped their

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moorings, and the barge glided from the shore and returned in the direction whence they had come.

A fanfare drew their attention to the castle, from which a small procession was approaching them. Peaceful intent was manifest from the cheerful waves, blaring horns, and shouts of welcome that accompanied their progress. The little band of newcomers returned the salutations, and while the two groups were still about threescore paces apart, a stout middle-aged man in stately robes hurried forward to Kedrigern's side. Squinting and peering closely into the wizard's face, he burbled, "Wonderful, wonderful! Welcome to Surreptitia! How good of you to come! You're the first to arrive, you know. I trust you had a pleasant journey. So glad to see you! Welcome, welcome, all!" Before he had finished greeting everyone, a matronly lady, equally well robed, joined him. Showering the four newcomers with smiles and affability, she introduced herself as Liliana, wife and consort to Flenbrudius, Prince of Surreptitia.

"We welcome you, truly we do. We so seldom have guests. In fact, we've never had them before today. But here you are," said the prince. He beamed on the visitors for a few moments, and then turned to Drurich with an expression of great interest and asked, "And now that you're here, can you tell us who you are?"

The knight's face darkened. "I am Drurich, Marshal of Pungloon, whom you have summoned by name. These are my...my...." He paused, searching for a word.

"We're his people," said Princess.

Flenbrudius gaped at the knight, astonished. He blinked several times and turned to Liliana, who mirrored his astonishment, and then he said to the visitors, "You're very welcome, all of you, and we're overjoyed to see you, really we are. But we didn't summon you. Oh, my, no. We never summon anyone to Surreptitia. There's no point. They'd only get lost on the way."

"I have been called to Surreptitia to take part in a great tournament," said Drurich, his voice rising. "I faced disgrace if I did not appear, and yet I was given no directions. No one knows the way."

"Well, yes, that's the problem. I'm terribly sorry. It's the doing of one of my ancestors. For some reason, he shut Surreptitia off from the world. But you found your way here, and that's what counts," Flenbrudius said, beaming.

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Forgetting all courtly etiquette, Drurich roared, "You threatened my honor!"

His outburst sent the prince's escort into confusion. Drurich was an imposing figure, and in his anger he seemed to grow in size. His florid visage glowed like a pippin. To prevent unpleasantness, Princess favored the guards with her most charming smile and Kedrigern, laying a restraining hand on Drurich's mighty arm, gave them a little wink of reassurance.

"Good gracious, no!" said Flenbrudius, recoiling in dismay. "We don't do things like that in Surreptitia. We're a nice quiet little principality, remote from the strife and struggle of the world. We don't threaten anyone with anything."

Drurich drew a series of deep slow breaths. His color faded to a mild roseate glow. While he was thus engaged in calming himself, Kedrigern said to their host and hostess, "Something very strange is going on. This knight has been summoned to present himself in the lists before your castle by dawn on Midsummer Day." Turning to the knight, he said, "Drurich, show the prince and princess your scroll."

Drurich quickly produced the document. Liliana read it, glanced at her husband in bewilderment and passed it to him. Holding it close to his eyes and squinting tightly, Flenbrudius read it slowly, moving his lips and nodding from time to time. He looked from Drurich to Princess to Kedrigern and then back to the scroll in utter confusion. "My good sir knight," said Flenbrudius, "we did not send this."

"And yet the lists are even now being prepared," Drurich said, with a sweeping gesture to the open ground before the castle, where men were busily trimming the grass and leveling the ground and setting up pavilions and a viewing stand.

Flenbrudius followed his gesture, screwing up his eyes and blinking helplessly until Liliana whispered, "The lists, dear."

"Ah, yes. They're for the tournament."

Drurich's expression brightened. "Then there is to be a tournament!"

"Oh, yes....provided others can find their way here, too. Can't have a tournament all by yourself. Wouldn't do."

Liliana, in a low confiding voice, said, "We, too, have received a message. You may read it for yourselves." She nudged Flenbrudius, who

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reached into his royal robes and after a bit of fumbling produced a scroll of his own. He handed it to Kedrigern, saying, "Do you mind? It's rather a strain for me."

Kedrigern read it aloud, with Princess and Drurich looking over either shoulder:

To their Graces, the most Eminent, Honored, and Clement Prince Flenbrudius and Princess Liliana:

Surreptitia has been selected as the site for the great Tournament of Heroes on Midsummer Day. You are hereby formally congratulated on your exceptional good fortune. Sixty-four of the bravest knights of Christendom will compete. You are to prepare the castle and the tiltyard for their entertainment. All other arrangements will be made by the sender of this message. Failure to comply will have unpleasant consequences.

The scroll was signed with an unintelligible squiggle, but a trio of massy seals depending from a heavy ribbon attested to its royal provenance. The message was terse and clear, yet the meaning remained enigmatic. All the same, it was a message one would be loath to dismiss.

"And you know nothing further?" Kedrigern asked Flenbrudius.

"Absolutely nothing!" he and Liliana cried.

"May I ask how this message was delivered?"

"That was most curious. Quite extraordinary," said the prince. "It was brought by a bird. A big bird."

"A white vulture," Liliana said in a voice hushed with foreboding. "It flew in one evening and dropped the scroll at our feet. Then it flew out again, silent as sin." She looked at them one by one, wide-eyed, nodding repeatedly to emphasize her words. "The sight filled me with dread."

"As well it might. One question more. The barge that brought us here — is it yours?" the wizard asked.

"We've never seen it before today. We thought it was yours."

"I believe it's part of the arrangements referred to in the message. Unless I'm very wrong, it's gone off to fetch your next shipment of visitors."

* * *

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Kedrigern's surmise proved correct. The barge returned that afternoon bearing the formidable Rombudgeon of the Tarns and the famed Hugh of Resolution. The following day brought sixteen more knights of great renown. In four days' time, sixty-four great champions of Christendom had assembled, knights and princes and even two young kings among them. The lists were ablaze with bright pavilions and glistening shields, and colorful banners, pennons, and standards of all kinds flapped and fluttered in the breeze.

All had come to Surreptitia to preserve and enhance their honor. By the end of the week, their common bond had made the knights quite friendly. They were known to one another by reputation, and every one of them was delighted to meet his fellows and size them up. The question of who had summoned them, and why, was quite overshadowed by their anticipation of the tournament.

To everyone's astonishment, on the night of the arrival of the last three knights, red-headed brothers from the northern islands, a page burst into the great hall bearing sixty-four scrolls delivered only minutes before by a flock of white vultures. Each scroll bore the name of one of the knights, and its contents assured him that a full explanation of the mysterious summons would be given on the fourth day hence.

Freed of concern for his honor, surrounded by his peers, Drurich at once immersed himself in enthusiastic shop talk, as did his knightly companions. At the sumptuous banquets that were held on the next three days, talk of bold deeds and perilous quests, legendary weapons, recent advances in armor and armament, lance technique, shield design, innovative siege tactics, and famous campaigns kept the guests in a high state of excitement and growing impatience. Flenbrudius and Liliana were delighted with their roles of host and hostess, and everyone — almost everyone — at the castle was thrilled by the prospect of the great pageant to come.

Princess was having a delightful time. Keeping her wings concealed turned out to be no problem at all. In imitation of her fashion, Liliana and her ladies-in-waiting had taken to wearing a light cloak at all times. The knights were outdoing one another in displays of courtesy toward her, and served as eager, albeit clumsy, dancing partners. The sole exception to the general merriment was Kedrigern, who was growing grumpier by the day.

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He and Princess had not revealed their true identities, and were being treated as Drurich's companions whose precise function remained undefined. This left Kedrigern in an awkward position. He was not a skilled dancer, he was bored to near-paralysis by the shop talk of knights and squires, he disliked the musicians' selections, and he was familiar with all the jester's routines. With nothing to do but poke about the castle and attempt to feign interest in the talk at the nightly banquets, he became ever more convinced that he and Princess were squandering their time on a fool's errand.

"What's the point of all this? Where is the wicked magic and evil enchantment we came here to thwart?" he demanded peevishly as he and Princess settled down to sleep after the third night of revelry. "Do you realize how much magic it will take to get out of here if that barge doesn't show up?"

"I wouldn't worry about the barge," said Princess, covering a yawn. "It's been ferrying guests and food and wine without a rest since we arrived. It's very dependable."

"Well, think of the lines, and the arguments when it's time to leave. Pushing and shoving. Probably violence. These knights may talk about courtesy, but when it comes to giving way and stepping aside...I may have to spell the lot of them."

"Don't fuss. Look upon this as a vacation," Princess said.

"Vacation," he growled. "Listening to a pack of overgrown bully-boys talk about pounding people into mush while they stuff themselves with food and guzzle mediocre wine. Some vacation."

As if she were addressing a small unruly child, Princess said, "Flenbrudius and Liliana are models of hospitality. The food and wine are of first quality. The knights are the finest in the land. Models of breeding, paragons of courtesy, champions of the helpless. These sixty-four heroes are civilization's bulwark against the perils that surround us. Every single one of them has been the subject of at least three ballads, and two are being considered for epics." When Kedrigern responded with a sour grunt, she continued, "Were it not for their courage, loyalty, valor, prowess — "

Kedrigern flung up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "All right, all right, I give up. They're our valiant protectors. The best and the boldest. We'd be lost without them. But why all this hugger-mugger and deception?

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Why a tournament in some kingdom nobody ever heard of, a place that can be reached only by means of a magic barge? Why the vultures and the scrolls and the mystery?"

"I don't see why you're so upset. Drurich hasn't let that bother him. He's having a grand time."

"He's happy because he'll have a chance to break a few of his bosom companions' heads. That's all any of these flowers of chivalry really care about. And you're happy because you're having a taste of court life — which I don't begrudge you for a minute," he quickly added at the sudden flash in her eyes. "I'm upset simply because none of it makes sense. We came here to protect Drurich against wicked magic. I haven't caught a single whiff of wickedness since we left home."

"Do you realize what you're doing? You're complaining because you've had a pleasant surprise."

"Not at all. I enjoy a pleasant surprise. I'm complaining because I don't want to have an unpleasant surprise when I least expect it."

Princess did not reply at once. At last she said, "Well, neither do I. But I see no sign of trouble at the moment, and since worrying does us no good and because I'm exhausted from all the dancing and tomorrow is the last banquet before the tournament, I'm going to sleep. Good night."

With that she turned her back and pulled the coverlet up over her head.

MORNING BROUGHT new arrivals. The barge emerged from the mist with a blare of trumpets. Within were six knights in splendid livery, a very pretty young lady in green, and an elderly man whom a herald announced as King Benixis the Pacific.

The king was a dignified figure: tall, erect, fine-boned, with long white hair, a flowing white beard, and an expression of such serenity as befits a king. His features were well suited to grace state ceremonies and gold coins.

Kedrigern knew of him only by reputation. Benixis was famed for his largesse to the poor, his efforts to bring peace to the land, and his general good intentions. He was equally well-famed for his eccentricities: he was known to have a fondness for schemes visionary to the point of dementia, which he pursued with great but evanescent zeal.

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The sight of Benixis at a tournament was certainly something out of the ordinary. He was known to disapprove strongly of all things martial from exhibitions of swordsmanship to all-out war. Kedrigern attributed his presence to some new, or hitherto unindulged, eccentricity. His presence here was odd — but that it was a portent of trouble he doubted very much. Still, one never knew.

The young lady was far more interesting. Kedrigern perceived at once that she was under some sort of spell, though its exact nature eluded him. It had all the marks of a very nasty one, but the lady herself radiated a dovelike sweetness in dramatic contrast to her burden of enchantment; to all appearances, she was as innocent as the babe newborn. Yet when her eyes met Kedrigern's, she quickly averted them with a shiver of fear, like a guilty thing surprised.

The arrival of a second lovely lady caused a great surge of interest among the knightly visitors, and understandably so. Such elfin grace and beauty would have made her presence at the side of a king understandable had the king been any but Benixis, who was a notoriously faithful husband to his wife of fifty-seven years.

Here, then, was a situation to be studied carefully. Kedrigern decided to remain incognito for a bit longer, and see what he could learn about Benixis and the lady.

He had not long to wait. In a brief eloquent speech at the banquet that evening, Benixis informed the company that he was present as the representative of great persons whose names could not yet be revealed. The knights, he explained, had been chosen from the finest and most renowned in the land to compete in a tournament to determine the Champion of All Champions. Because secrecy was essential to the undertaking, Surreptitia had been chosen as the venue. Finding their way was proof of their fitness for the test. Benixis apologized profusely for the necessary subterfuge and any concern or inconvenience it might have caused. A certain royal personage whom he was not at liberty to identify would arrive on the last day to crown the victor, after which a proclamation would make known to all the world the bravery and prowess of the champion and all the participants. A triumphant year-long progress of champion and survivors would then set forth.

Loud cheering greeted his words. A few knights bristled at the

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deception, but their anger quickly cooled before the enthusiasm of their companions and gratification at being among the chosen. The cheers increased in volume when the young lady in green rose from his side, introduced herself as the ward of Benixis, and said shyly, in a bewitching accent that Kedrigern could not identify, that she begged the honor of a dance with each of the bold, brave, handsome, courteous, chivalrous, noble knights present so that she might personally urge each champion to outstanding deeds in the lists.

Kedrigern looked on with interest that evening as she danced untiring through chaconnes, allemandes, galliards, sarabandes, bourrées, passacaglias, and a dozen more dances to which he could put no name. Princess, too, was dancing, but as the evening wore on she begged off and seated herself at Kedrigern's side. The lady in green danced on as fresh as ever.

"She's amazing," said Princess. "I love to dance, but my feet feel as though they're on fire and I'm too tired to trip through another measure."

"She's a child, my dear. Her foot is light. She's full of youthful energy," said the wizard. "And besides, she's under a spell. Hadn't you noticed?"

"I've been too busy dancing. But I suspected something like that. Even a child shows signs of fatigue after dancing for hours without a pause. What sort of spell?"

"I can't be certain. It's not like any I've ever encountered before."

"I hope she doesn't tire herself out. I'm looking forward to a nice chat with her tomorrow. I'm dying to talk about something besides great feats of arms."

"I doubt she'll be tired. The spell seems to give her enormous energy."

Princess gave him a weary smile. "We could both use a nice little spell like that."

"I'm not sure that 'nice' is the proper word," said Kedrigern. Princess gave him a curious look, but he did not elaborate.

"I'll see what I can find out."

"Have you had a chance to talk to Benixis? He's a bit silly, but at least he's unlikely to talk to a lady about bashing and smiting."

Princess turned to look more closely at the royal guest. "He doesn't look silly. He looks dignified."

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"Trust me, he's silly. Well-meaning, but silly. He takes up every wild idea that comes his way. He's been known to predict that one day coaches and wagons will move without horses to draw them, and do so — "

"That's not silly. The barge that took us here — "

" — Without magic," Kedrigern concluded. "And he also believes that we'll be able to chat with people who are a hundred leagues away."

"How?"

"He hasn't worked out the details. He never does. He's an idea man. Continually getting worked up about some mad new scheme and squandering a small fortune on it."

"Do you think he's behind this tournament?"

"No. This is very much out of his line. Benixis has always been against duels and tournaments and wars and such. It's the only fixed idea he has."

"Maybe he's changed his mind."

"Maybe," Kedrigern said without a hint of conviction. "I thought that the lady with him might have something to do with it, but she seems intent on urging the battlers on to greater efforts. And there's that spell...I wonder...."

"You suspect her."

"No. She reminds me of a story I once heard, that's all. I can't quite remember...."

"Whatever the spell is, it certainly attracts men," said Princess.

The girl in green was dancing a lively galliard with a series of partners. As each of them dropped out, exhausted, another eagerly took his place only to fall out in his turn as she danced on, as fresh as ever, her long golden hair whirling around her, her eyes wild with excitement and delight. All around her, men gazed dreamily as she twirled and spun, eyes sparkling, lips parted in a childlike smile of pure pleasure.

Kedrigern rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Now that you mention it, there's a strong aura of love charm about her. But it seems to radiate outward. She certainly doesn't behave like a lovesick child."

"It gives her a lot of energy," Princess said. "She seems inexhaustible."

"She shows those knights no mercy. I think we'll have a very slow tournament tomorrow," said the wizard.

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As things turned out, they had no tournament at all. Rain began to fall in the night, and by morning was coming down in torrents, streaming from every gutter in the castle, turning the moat into a lake and the tiltyard into a lagoon. Under the leaden sky, pavilions and banners sagged and drooped, saturated by the downpour.

The mood within the castle was even drearier than the weather outside. Knights loitered in the halls and drooped in doorways, sulked on the staircases, sighed listlessly on benches and joint-stools. In contrast to their customary rubicund faces, they looked unusually pale, even sickly, as though they had all contracted some wasting illness overnight. Kedrigern's cheery greetings — he enjoyed rainy mornings when he was snug indoors — called forth nothing heartier than a sigh. Even the sight of Princess drew no more than a momentary flicker of interest. When the girl in green appeared, looking as fresh and lovely as a spring bouquet, and every man joined with his fellows in a great communal groan of despair, Kedrigern saw a pattern beginning to form. Fragments of memory began to fit together.

"The knights seem quite subdued this morning," Princess observed. "I suppose they're disappointed. Or maybe they're just worn out from all that dancing."

"There's more to it than that, my dear. Much more. Look at them. Gilles Poing-de-fer is quite undone. He's as white as whey. And Hugh of Resolution, over in the corner — he's all sicklied over with the pale cast of thought."

"The others are quite pasty-faced, too. Even Drurich. He looks as though he wants only to waste away."

"He does, my lady," said Sidrie, who had been standing nearby, and now joined them. He looked concerned. "He won't take food or drink. He won't speak a word. None of them will."

"They're overreacting. After all, the tournament will begin as soon as the tiltyard dries," Princess said.

"I've tried to tell him so, my lady, but he just groans. He's not himself."

"He does look a bit peaked."

"Worse than that, my lady. He's always hated dancing, but last night

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he danced incessantly. And he's famed for his robust health, but this morning...just look at him...so haggard and so woebegone. They're all that way, pale and sighing and sad."

"You're not. And neither am I. I feel good, and I have an excellent appetite," said Kedrigern.

"So do I," said Sidrie.

Princess gave her husband a narrow look. "You know something," she said.

"I think I do," he said. "I'll be certain when I've spoken with Benixis."

Dismissing them with a wave, Princess said, "Then why don't you two break your fast with him? It's time I spoke with that sweet little girl in green, don't you agree?"

"Decidedly," said Kedrigern.

"Do either of you know her name?"

"I don't believe I've heard it mentioned," the wizard said, and Sidrie shook his head helplessly. "But if she's who I suspect she is, this tournament is more than anyone bargained for."

LEAVING PRINCESS to greet the girl in green, wizard and squire proceeded to the great hall, where they found Flenbrudius and Liliana seated at one end of the long table with Benixis and his knights at the other. The knights and their lord appeared unafflicted by the general malaise; looked, in fact, rather smug. Kedrigern's suspicion became certainty when Benixis and his knights fell instantly silent and exchanged furtive glances at sight of him and the squire.

"Lovely morning, isn't it? I haven't felt this good in a long time. Have you, Sidrie?" Kedrigern said, giving the squire a poke in the ribs.

"No, not for ever so long. I've got quite an appetite."

"So have I. Let's dig in."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said Benixis, rising from his place. "Before you sit down, you must meet my ward. Charming girl. I don't believe you've been properly introduced. Once you meet her you'll find her irresistible."

For Kedrigern, that was the clincher. Vague memories and suspicions fell into a neat pattern, leading to a single conclusion. He walked to the

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king's side. Lowering his voice, he said, "If La Belle Dame sans Merci is your ward, I'm your grandmother. The game's over, Benixis."

Benixis took a step back. His look of surprise quickly turned to indignation. "You presume, sir," he said with a lordly air.

"I do not. Sit down. I have something to say to you," said Kedrigern. When his knights started up from their places, hands on their swordhilts, to punish such disrespect toward their lord, he turned to them and held up a warning forefinger. "Keep your seats or I'll turn you into slices of bread. And then I'll toast you."

"He can do it, too. He's a wizard," said Sidrie.

"I am Kedrigern of Silent Thunder Mountain, to be precise."

With a groan of annoyance Benixis said, "So you're the one. She's been nervous since we landed. She sensed someone here with the power to thwart my plan, but she couldn't get a fix on him. Do as he says," he ordered, and the knights resumed their seats, glowering. Turning to Kedrigern, he said, "It will do no good to threaten me or my loyal followers. It's too late. Anything you may do now is fruitless. My design has succeeded, and though you may employ your wizardry to impede it, you cannot undo it. I have made the world a safer place in spite of you all." He settled defiantly into his chair.

"So far all you've done is ruin the spirits of a lot of healthy men."

"I have saved them from themselves! These pale kings and princes and knights will fight no more."

"That's for them to decide, Benixis, not you. I must admit you did it quite cleverly, but it was a wicked thing to do nonetheless."

Benixis struck the tabletop. "No! It is a good thing, and this is only the first step." He paused, and then, in a softer voice, said, "I will go on to lure all the greatest warriors to this obscure place, and have this enchanted maid work her magic and render them lovesick and helpless. Surreptitia will become a haven for reformed warriors. And as the number of brutes and bullies dwindles, war will become impossible. I will bring peace to all the world!" The old king gazed into the distance, a rapturous gleam in his eyes.

"A very noble idea. And what if we're attacked by the barbarians from the east, or the savages from the west, or the pirates from the north? Who's to defend us?"

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The gleam dimmed for a moment, then flared up as Benixis declared, "I will think of something!"

"I'm aware of your notions, Benixis. Like your idea of a way to talk to people we can't even see, or move wagons without horses or oxen to draw them."

"I haven't forgotten my earlier projects. I've just set them aside while I establish universal peace."

Kedrigern could see that he was not getting through to the erratic old king. Then an idea occurred to him. One fights fire with fire and magic with magic; therefore one ought to fight pipe dreams with pipe dreams. "I have a far better way of achieving peace, Benixis. A foolproof scheme. All I need is some time to work it out."

That got the king's interest. Benixis started, like a dozing man suddenly awakened. He studied the wizard closely. "A foolproof scheme?"

"Absolutely foolproof. I'm working on the design of a room that flies up and down."

Benixis was all attention now. "Up...and down?"

"Up and down," said Kedrigern with an illustrative vertical gesture of his hand. "I'll install one in every castle. It will whisk people from the deepest dungeon to the topmost tower in an instant. And the whole world will be at peace."

The rapturous look once again spread over the king's countenance. It lasted for only a moment, then crumpled as he demanded, "How can a little flying room achieve that?"

Kedrigern thought furiously. He had considered the idea sufficiently mad to persuade Benixis without the need for explanations. "Well...no one could sneak up on his neighbor anymore. It would be too easy to rush up to the tower and keep a lookout. And then you could rush right back down and give the alarm. And...and if things grew heated, people could get to safety in a hurry, and then talk it over."

Benixis pondered that for a time, then said, "How?"

Kedrigern was inspired. "By using your method of speaking to each other at great distances. Of course, you'd have to perfect that first, but once you did, and combined it with the movable room...."

"Yes! Yes, I see! They would talk.... There would be peace.... And no one would have to climb stairs anymore! We could turn the old staircases into...into...."

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"Into shelves!" Kedrigern cried. "There's never enough shelf space in a castle."

"Wonderful, wonderful! But what about the knights? They'd still want to fight."

"They'd be too busy reading. All that new shelf space could be filled with books. Epics! Chronicles! Histories! Chansons de geste!"

The knights exchanged glances of dismay. They went unnoticed by all but the wizard. The gleam in Benixis's eye was now practically a beacon. He muttered to himself, nodding, frowning in concentration; he did rapid calculations on his fingers; at last he turned to Kedrigern and said, "I must return to my castle at once and set to work. A room that goes up and down. Brilliant. We will need rope. Much rope. Long strong rope. And lots of pulleys. And conversing at great distances will require...many other things. And then the shelves. Oh, yes, it will work. All I have to do is...."

"Just be sure to send the barge back. The rest of us will want to leave, too."

Benixis looked at him, puzzled. "The barge will return of its own volition. It's not my barge. It's theirs," he said, pointing to Flenbrudius and Liliana.

It took that pair a moment to gather their wits and break their dazed silence. They looked from king to wizard and back to king, Flenbrudius in a flurry of blinks and Liliana in a frenzy of nods. "It is?" they asked in unison.

"Don't you know the history of your own land?"

Flenbrudius shrugged. "No one's ever written it."

"We're not much for reading, anyway," Liliana added.

"No place to keep books," Flenbrudius explained. "This castle is short on shelf space."

"See?" said the wizard, winking at Benixis.

Benixis fixed his hosts with a schoolmasterly eye. "That barge goes back to your great-great-grandfather's reign. He loved merrymaking — fairs, fêtes, festivals, tournaments, any excuse to have a lot of people to Surreptitia for a few days of revelry. The magic barge was his way of making sure his guests got here and got back out. Safe, simple to operate...useful for bringing in supplies, too. Just the thing.... He had it

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made for him by a wizard named...oh, what was his name? Donovan? Dennison...? No, Dendrigan. That was it, Dendrigan."

"Dendrigan!" Kedrigern cried. "Of course. I should have recognized his work."

"You knew him?" Liliana asked.

"Very slightly. He was fond of music and chess. That should have — but please continue," said Kedrigern, turning to Benixis with a bow of apology.

The aged king looked at him vacantly. "About chess, or music?"

"About my great-great-grandfather and his barge," said Flenbrudius.

"Ah, yes. He had it made for him by a wizard named...named...."

"Dendrigan," Liliana said.

"Something like that, yes. He used that barge all the time. Very sociable man, your great-great-grandfather, from all I've been able to learn. But his son was just the opposite — hated crowds, noise, people in general. He was also, I regret to say, very stingy. He hid the barge away and started rumors about Surreptitia's being an evil and dangerous place. He had all the maps destroyed and he paid men to spread rumors...dreadful rumors. No more guests came. But the barge retained its magic. All anyone had to do was say the proper phrase and it would be back in operation. My court wizard found the phrase for me, and my plan was under way," Benixis gloated. "But now I have a better plan...a room that goes up and down...shelf space...knights reading and discussing books, even when they're leagues apart. Wonderful. Come, my men! We have work to do!"

"You're leaving? So soon?" Flenbrudius said. "I thought you were going to stay...bring back the old days."

"No time for that. I must set to work at once."

"Don't forget your ward," Kedrigern said.

"Won't need her anymore. She can stay. Marry someone, if she likes. I'll send a dowry by barge," Benixis said.

"And what about the knights? La Belle Dame brought a curse on them."

"Remove it, if you can. You're a wizard, aren't you?"

"I am, and I can, and I will. The fee is sixty-four crowns, and I'll have it before you leave."

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"Outrageous! I'll never pay!"

"Then you and your men will find yourselves rooted to the spot until I receive it."

"I am a king," said Benixis with lordly hauteur.

"And I am a wizard," said Kedrigern with a courtly bow.

Benixis gave a scornful laugh and tried to move. He could not, nor could his knights, all of whom sat fixed to their seats as firmly as if men and bench and floor were one. After a moment of stunned silence, they unleashed a tirade of threats and vituperation of startling variety and intensity. Their outburst was of short duration. Under the wizard's cool gaze, their voices faded and fell silent. Their expressions of rage became masks of apprehension, uneasiness, and at last, fear.

Turning to Sidrie, Kedrigern said, "Shall we take our breakfast and retire to a quiet corner?"

"Yes, indeed, Master Kedrigern," said the squire.

They walked arm-in-arm to the sideboard, where they piled their plates with rolls and jam and cheese and fruit, filled two beakers with ale, and with broad smiles withdrew to the far end of the chamber, where they ate and chatted and exchanged amusing stories, ignoring the cries, threats, and pleas from Benixis and his men. It took no more than half an hour of affixation to convince Benixis that the wizard meant exactly what he said. The six knights emptied their purses onto the table, but the total came to only thirty-one crowns and a few pennies. Being royal, Benixis carried no money. He was forced to part with a large emerald ring to make up the required sum.

"This is an outrage, wizard. I'll lodge a protest," he said.

"No outrage at all. You caused a problem, you pay to set things right. Couldn't be fairer."

"I'm a king. I ought to get a discount."

Kedrigern had no desire to let Benixis off easily, but he did not want to be accused of overcharging. After a moment's consideration, he said, "Your Majesty has a point. Since you're paying in advance, I'll take off ten percent."

Benixis made some calculations on his fingers and finally, in exasperation, said, "Mathematics is not the pastime of kings. Make it a round seven crowns."

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"Bargaining is not the pastime of wizards, but I'll be generous. You owe me fifty-seven crowns. Now."

"The ring alone is worth more than that," Benixis protested.

"It is not. Fifty-seven crowns or you can all sit here until the castle crumbles."

"Fifty-seven?! It can't be that much! You're trying to get me all mixed up so you can cheat me!" Benixis cried. Two of the knights added their voices in support, and soon all six knights, their king, and Kedrigern were shouting out different figures. By this time Kedrigern was himself becoming confused, and wishing to get the matter over with, he brought his fist down on the table and said, "Twenty-five crowns and the ring. That's my lowest figure. Pay it or become a permanent fixture."

Benixis grumbled, but paid. Kedrigern accepted his fee with becoming gratitude and released them, even returning seven crowns for their travel expenses. They swept from the hall without a word of parting.

Their hunger satisfied, wizard and squire took their leave of the dumbstruck Flenbrudius and Liliana. It was time to see what could be done for the drooping knights. Kedrigern was not eager to confront the problem — mass unspellings were complicated and tricky — but having collected his fee, he was honor bound. They could not be ignored. Scarcely had he and Sidrie left the great hall when sounds of hearty masculine laughter, whoops and shouts of hilarity greeted their ears. They exchanged a startled glance and hastened forward.

An unexpected sight greeted their eyes. At one end of the chamber a trestle table had been erected and two huge carven chairs placed upon it as seats of honor. In one was Princess, in the other the girl in green. Both were clapping their hands in delight, laughing and calling out encouragement to the company.

The knights, princes, and kings, wan and morose no longer, had organized a human checker game on the tiles of the hall. As Kedrigern and Sidrie watched, Hugh of Resolution and Gilles Poing-de-fer hunched over, hands on knees, to allow Drurich to leapfrog over them, landing on the back row. As he touched down, Drurich roared, "King me! King me! Hoorah for the red!" Half of the crowd joined merrily in his cry, while half cheered for the black. There was great laughter, roaring, backslapping, and boyish horseplay on the board and among the onlookers

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awaiting their turn to play as the girl in green placed a paper crown on Drurich's head.

Kedrigern hefted the purse of coins and the ring. "That's the easiest fee I ever earned," he said. "I wonder how I did it."

Princess peered out into the mists as the barge bore them to the edge of the Black Marsh. "La Belle Dame is really very sweet. Hers is a tragic story."

"She was a public hazard," Kedrigern said.

"It wasn't her fault. What a terrible spell to be under!"

"And you say it was the work of a bog-fairy?"

"That should have been obvious at once. I never took more pleasure in unspelling anyone," Princess said with a grim smile of satisfaction. "No man could resist her, and as soon as he touched her hand or looked into her eyes he became so lovestruck he was completely useless. He'd just mope and droop and pine away. It was like a sickness."

"I didn't mope. Neither did Sidrie. Or Benixis, for that matter."

"She only works on knights, princes, and kings."

"Benixis is a king. And Flenbrudius is a prince."

"Flenbrudius is near-sighted and Benixis is silly."

"And his six knights?"

"His court wizard put a protection on them."

After a long reflective pause, Kedrigern said, "All the same, the lady might have done something, even if it was no more than wear a veil."

"She tried that. She tried everything. The spell had no loopholes."

Kedrigern was not about to give up. "She didn't have to get mixed up with Benixis, and plot against those unsuspecting knights. That was a nasty business."

"She happened to believe that bringing about a peaceful world was a good idea. There are those who do, you know. And she lived with the hope that somewhere among the sixty-four champions she'd find Sir Right and he'd free her from the spell."

"So you despelled her."

With an airy gesture, Princess said, "It was the least I could do. And once she was despelled the knights were themselves again."

"They certainly made a quick recovery. They were like a bunch of boys on a holiday."

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"Weren't they cute? She's persuaded them to have a tournament of games. No bashing or hacking or anything like that. Just good clean games. Everyone gets a prize and the lucky man gets the hand of a fair lady. She's eager to settle down after all that time spelled."

"So they've become peaceful after all. I wonder what Benixis would say to that."

"Speaking of Benixis," she said, "That was a very substantial fee you received from him."

"Very," said the wizard, smiling.

"This ring goes beautifully with my green-and-yellow gown," she said, holding her hand up to the light the better to view the emerald.

"You outshine it, my dear."

"So sweet of you to say so," she said, squeezing his hand. After a moment's silence, she asked, "But you didn't really disenchant those knights, did you?"

"Well, perhaps technically speaking...."

"Technically speaking, wasn't it La Belle Dame who did it?"

"I suppose, in a sense...."

"And only because I unspelled her. So I was the instrument of their disenchantment."

"Well, yes, one might say...."

"Then wouldn't it be fair...?"

The question hung in the misty air for a time. Kedrigern sighed and took out the purse of gold crowns. He placed it in her hands. She affixed the purse to her girdle, threw her arms around his neck, and gave him a kiss.

"Merci," she said.

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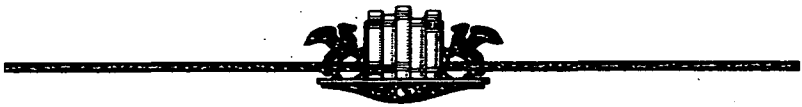

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Gil's All Fright Diner, by A. Lee Martinez, Tor Books, 2005, $12.95.

IN A recent column I made mention of how tired I am of vampires. Perhaps what I should have said is that I'm tired of the same-old, same-old take on them. But I'm also tired of the shtick vampires — where whatever it is the author has used to set their vampire apart from tradition is pretty much all the story has got going for it. It's not much different from writing a private eye novel, giving the main character a couple of quirks — what's called the Funny Hat character — and those quirks are all that the character has going for himself. It's especially tiresome when the quirks are played for laughs, instead of allowing humor to arise naturally from situations and character interactions.

That said, the vampire in *Gil's All Fright Diner* is pretty much a farcical character. Actually, the novel as a whole is farcical, from the redneck, cowardly vampire and his good ol' boy werewolf buddy to the jailbait teenage occultist trying to raise a variation on Lovecraft's Old Gods so that she can rule over the ruin that's left of the world. But it works, nevertheless, because while the characters are over the top (I haven't even mentioned the plague of zombies attacking, night after night, the lonely diner of the book's title), and the situations are certainly preposterous, Martinez wins us over because he cares about both.

He cares about them, and so we do, even when we're laughing ourselves silly, or shaking ours heads over some new outrageous plot development.

As for that plot, the book opens with our heroes Earl (the vampire) and Duke (the werewolf) bickering as they arrive at a diner in a small Texas town. No sooner are they inside, than the place is attacked by

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zombies. The waitress/owner (well, sort of owner — she took over the place when the real owner mysteriously disappeared) asks them for their help, and the book is off and running.

What is it about Texas writers that makes them so inventive? Is it something in the water? Martinez holds his own with the best of them, coming up with everything from vampire cows to oracular eight-balls that can also imprison a spirit.

This is a gory book in places, with some really graphic scenes, but it's also one of the better written and funniest novels I've read in years. Oh, and let me emphasize yet again that right from the start, through all the slapstick mayhem, I really did care for these characters. I think you will, too.

John Constantine/Hellblazer: All His Engines, by Mike Carey & Leonardo Manco, Vertigo Comics, 2005, $24.95.

I feel sorry for all those people whose first (and probably only) introduction to the long-running character of John Constantine will be the recent Hollywood extravaganza *Constantine*. Let me tell you right now that Keanu Reeves, with his good-boy looks and impassive performances, isn't, and could never be, the dark and complex character that long-time DC and Vertigo readers know. The original Constantine is also decidedly British, with his roots in the punk scene of the late seventies, unlike Reeves's character.

First introduced in the pages of *Swamp Thing* in 1985, jumping onto the page from the fertile mind of Alan Moore, Constantine has gone on to become a mainstay of the DC Universe, usually at the edge of the main stage. He works in the shadows, this "con man, joker, thief... Magus," as he's described in the afterword of the book in hand.

Created by Moore, Constantine was defined by Jamie Delano when the character was given his own title with *Hellblazer* in the late eighties. The reason for his appeal to readers isn't much different from why various authors over the years have so enjoyed telling his stories.

Jamie Delano: "John is a man constantly driven to live up to his own expectations, at the same time undermined by the knowledge that failure is inevitable and laughing himself s**tless at the ridiculous spectacle of his struggle."

Garth Ennis: "I liked the 'ordinary bloke' aspect of Constantine. With *Hellblazer*, I could write a monthly comic featuring a normal,

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non-superpowered or costumed character who moved in a recognizable world, with realistic motivation and moral behavior. His reactions would be those of a mortal, vulnerable man — and the fact that he was a bit of a bastard helped."

Paul Jenkins: "He won't suffer fools gladly, he won't be shat on. He likes to pretend he's a mean, heartless bastard, but the way I saw it was that nobody's just one color, there has to be another side to him."

Brian Azzarello: "John's a spiritual grifter, a con man working with a psychological shell game. You may be certain where that pea is, but the only certainty is you know where it is if he lets you. It's this control — or illusion of control — that lies at the heart of the character. He may not be one step ahead of the game, but he makes you think he is."

Neil Gaiman: "Flawed, smart, funny and cool. He's also a dickheaded, stubborn idiot, who causes nothing but doom and misery for his loved ones and friends."

Like the movie, *All the Engines* is set in L.A., or at least mostly, but there the similarities end. In the graphic novel, Constantine is asked by his oldest friend Chas to look into the cause of a strange malady that has put his niece into a coma. As usually happens in a Constantine story, that small drama expands into one that plays out across a much broader canvas, encompassing pantheons of forgotten gods and demons, with Constantine in the middle, playing all sides of the equation.

Leonardo Manco provides graphic (at times, some might feel, too graphic) depictions as the story unwinds, but he proves to be equally capable at rendering the quiet, tender moments and times when the action and horrors escalate. And Mike Carey writes Constantine with the brash vigor of his predecessors, creating a complicated and inventive story worthy of the canon as it exists so far.

If you're a fan of dark fantasy and characters with a punkish attitude who find themselves in impossible situations, do yourself a favor and check out this graphic novel before, or instead of, the film. And if you want more, or would like to see how Constantine developed over the years, Vertigo has fourteen collections taken from the regular comic series available in trade paperback format.

Perfect Circle, by Sean Stewart, Small Beer Press, 2004, $15.

Well, with the publication of Sean Stewart's *Perfect Circle* last

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year, we can add another book to the growing list that makes up the Ghost Story "I see dead people" sub-genre.

The Sixth Sense movie from a few years ago seems to have brought these sorts of stories to the forefront once more, but they've been around much longer than that, from the Topper books in the 1920s and earlier still. I'm guessing that before we sat around the campfires in the long ago and made up stories about the gods to explain the world around us, we were telling each other ghost stories.

The reason *The Sixth Sense* stirred up the interest that it did wasn't so much because of the concept of a character being able to interact with the dead, but because of the big surprise ending. Which was very cool (even though Shyamalan has been trying to pull off the same coup with every subsequent film release, with ever-lessening effect).

But in some ways, it's too bad that the ending got all the attention it did, because the idea of being able to communicate with the dead is so much more interesting. And so long as one doesn't try to pull off some new big surprise, exploring the connections between a possible afterlife and the one we live in is the kind of story that can't get old. The ghosts of the dead were once people, and if the characterizations are well-drawn and true, we're never going to get tired of reading and writing about them.

For one thing, there's such an incredible variety in the subject matter, since in the right hands, every person's story, whether they're dead or alive, can be a riveting and illuminating experience.

Take the book in hand.

Will Kennedy can see the dead, but it hasn't helped him out much in his life. When the story opens, he's been divorced for twelve years, desperately loves his young daughter who lives with his ex, and has just lost yet another nowhere job. He's an old throwback punk, but now that he's in his early thirties the idea of anarchy and who-needs-money? has gotten old.

One of his cousins offers him a thousand dollars to help him get rid of the ghost in his garage, and after some persuasion, Kennedy accepts. Big mistake, because that just starts him off on a terrible roller coaster of events that soon show him that no matter how bad things are, they can still get worse. And they do.

Stewart has done a wonderful job with the Texas setting, but has particularly outdone himself with his characters. While even the walk-ons feel fully developed in just the

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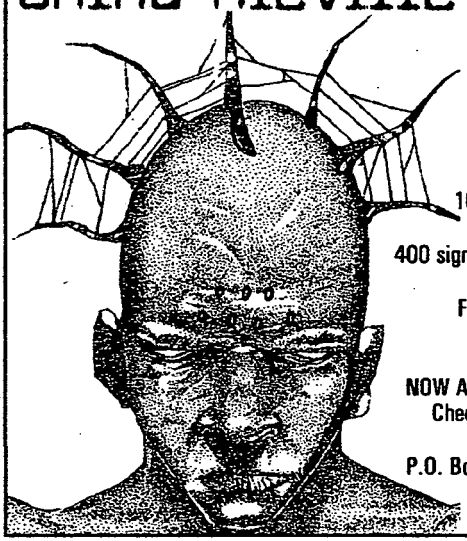
China Miéville KING RAT



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few lines they get, it's the main cast that shines with depth. Kennedy himself is particularly believable and complex. He's pretty much a loser who still feels he can pull himself out of the hole he's dug himself into, but it's not as simple as that. The true depths of his unhappiness and loneliness are eventually revealed in his absorbing interactions with his extended family, his ex-wife, his next door neighbor and best (maybe only) friend, and even some of the ghosts, such as that of his older cousin AJ who died when she was seventeen, or his Uncle Billy whose spirit gave Kennedy his first experience with the supernatural world.

I started this review with a jokey, throw-away remark, which perhaps set the wrong tone. This is a serious, well-written, thoughtful novel — not without touches of humor (though it's a dark humor) and still inventive (I loved the ghost roads that keep threatening to take Kennedy away), but one very much rooted in our world.

Highly recommended.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

H. P. Lovecraft: Tales, edited by Peter Straub, The Library of America, 2005, $35.

MY grandfather back in Arkansas would not eat frog legs. Not, that is, until the day he was served a plateful of small, tasty drumsticks. After putting away a dozen or so, he looked at my grandmother, stirring up more gravy at the stove. "How many legs," he said, "did this chicken have?"

So it is with a taste for stories of horror and the supernatural. Those who don't possess it can only wonder and shake their heads, or, should they be critics and proponents of high art — most famously Edmund Wilson in a number of essays on genre fiction, more recently in the furor over Stephen King's receiving a National Book Award — cavil and disparage. Many will accept into the fold only those stories of the supernatural that go abroad dressed in mufti, pretending to be something else, passing.

All these thoughts come bumping in the night because of the latest volume in The Library of America, which seats Howard Phillips Lovecraft on the bus alongside the like of Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Raymond Chandler, and Richard Wright.

Imprimatur, anyone? Get your imprimatur here! While they last!

Quite probably Lovecraft, a blazingly intelligent, well-educated man, would be surprised to find himself in such company. A craftsman of the first order, he was nonetheless eminently aware that he worked a small patch of land all but lost to the sprawl of farms: that not everyone has a taste for kohlrabi.

Still, as Robertson Davies pointed out, people are desperate "for assurance that the visible world is not the only world, which is an almost intolerable state of mind." Some of us go for the comfort of religion or New Age trappings, some

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for the discomfort of tales of alien abduction, conspiracies, and crop circles, and some for a ground curiously in between, offering at one and the same time both comfort and its opposite: edge literature.

Yet even among its fellows — the crime novel, fantasy, science fiction, and other arealist fiction — horror is often perceived as a poor cousin, sent to its room when company comes. Will the appearance of this latest Library of America volume alter that? Almost certainly not, even with writers of the mettle of Peter Straub, Ramsey Campbell, Poppy Z. Brite, and Dennis Etchison busily toiling in their own vegetable patches just up the hollow. What it *will* do, is prompt many to read, or to reread and reconsider, the work of H. P. Lovecraft.

There are plenty among us, I suspect, who have more an impression of Lovecraft than we have any intimate knowledge or informed opinion of his work. Chances are good that we read it in the squall of our youth and have not since returned. We recall the strange names, the adjective-shrouded nouns, the often feverish prose, the endless procession of events too terrible to be penned and imports too awful to be perceived; yet over the years — for all Lovecraft's ubiquity, for all the encomia from fellow writers — our apprehension of Lovecraft's work has been fatally abridged, perhaps tempered as well by memories of a host of imitators.

In addition, as is the case with many such singular writers, Lovecraft has become, through the years, iconic. It is difficult to see past the image: the brooding New England recluse hemmed in by cats and eccentric preoccupations. There is also the fact that, like Hammett and Chandler, so much has Lovecraft become an element of the very air we breathe and the ground upon which we tread, that we take his innovations for granted, failing to recognize and to honor them.

"Lovecraft is, in many senses, the linchpin of the twentieth-century weird tale," Lovecraft biographer and key critic S. T. Joshi has written, "not only for his absorption of the best weird work of the past but for his nurturing of a fair proportion of the best work that followed him." It's from Joshi's editions of Lovecraft texts that the current volume, edited by Peter Straub, draws.

A commentator once remarked of Hammett and Chandler that they took murder out of the country chateaus and put it back in the hands of the people who actually commit it.

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Lovecraft's work precipitated a similar relocation. If the weird tale is, as Joshi defines it, one of "cosmic fear," then Lovecraft moved the locus of that fear from a focus on man's affairs to one in which human concerns have no purchase, no significance. The humanocentric pose, he wrote, was impossible to him. Individuals are "momentary trifles bound from a common nothingness toward another cosmic nothingness." Horrible engines forever clang and crash above our heads. The Old Ones of "At the Mountains of Madness" created all life on Earth "as jest or mistake." Whatever may motivate the beings of "The Colour out of Space," those motivations remain incomprehensible to us.

"Howard Phillips Lovecraft was the Copernicus of the horror story," Fritz Leiber observed. "He shifted the focus of supernatural dread from man and his little world and his gods, to the stars and the black and unplumbed gulfs of intergalactic space. To do this effectively, he created a new kind of horror story and new methods for telling it."

Or, as Lovecraft himself attested in the introduction to his landmark *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927): "The one test of the really weird is simply this — whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim."

Howard Phillips Lovecraft lived 1890-1937, almost the full span, in fact, of the golden era of the weird tale, which Joshi sets at 1880-1940. The year of Lovecraft's birth saw the first U.S. edition of Sherlock Holmes, the Sherman Antitrust Act, Wounded Knee, publication of *Lord Jim*, and designation of Ellis Island as an immigration station; the year of his death witnessed Stalinist purges, Buchenwald up and running, Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and Turing's seminal paper on digital computers. Lovecraft began publishing around 1917, his major work appearing chiefly in *Weird Tales* in the mid-twenties to early thirties. (Stories in the current volume run chronologically from 1919 to 1936.)

Lovecraft hailed as twin watersheds in his intellectual life the time when he discovered the Hellenic world and that in which he truly embraced and understood the immensity of space, of the great

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void that surrounds us. The "boons and calamities visited upon mankind for cryptic and wholly extra-terrestrial reasons" had early on assured him of man's impermanence and insignificance; by seventeen he had "formed in all essential particulars" his enduring cosmic view. He could not write about ordinary people, he maintained, because he had no interest in man's relations with his fellows. It was only man's relationship to the cosmos — to the unknown — that intrigued him.

"I choose weird stories because they suit my inclinations best — one of my strongest and most persistent wishes being to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which for ever imprison us and frustrate our curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis."

And what becomes of rereading Lovecraft almost four decades down the line?

Well, to start with, one finds that, like Twain's parents in the famous epigram, it has gotten much smarter in ensuing years, hoisting itself out of the blur of all those other books read in youth and the myriad preconceptions inculcated since, to reveal itself as truly revolutionary.

The stories are told after the fact, almost always in narrative summary by a discounted teller, a man who cannot assimilate, who can neither quite believe nor comprehend, what he has seen and suspects. All we are taught, all we assume and believe, is false; and trap doors wait at every turn — the very maw of the universe waits — to spring open beneath us. Many stories in fact take the form of investigations (a word which, not incidentally, turns up again and again), as in this opening of "The Thing on the Doorstep":

"It is true that I have sent six bullets through the head of my best friend, and yet I hope to shew by this statement that I am not his murderer. At first I shall be called a madman — madder than the man I shot in his cell at the Arkham Sanitarium."

Or this, from "The Shadow out of Time":

"After twenty-two years of nightmare and terror, saved only by a desperate conviction of the mythical source of certain impressions, I am unwilling to vouch for the truth of that which I think I found in

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Western Australia on the night of July 17-18, 1935."

With some surprise one finds that there is a gradual movement away from the overwrought, adjective-drenched style that first comes to mind when one recalls Lovecraft, to a later, contemplative style Joshi describes as an amalgam of eighteenth-century stateliness, the "atmospheric floridity" of Poe and Wilde, and the careful formulations of philosophic writing. It is a style that, in its well-crafted sentences, overall balance, and ever sensual surface, puts me in mind of nothing so much as the fine penmanship once taught universally in our schools.

True, there remain those breathless final, often italicized lines:

"*It was his twin brother, but it looked more like the father than he did.*"

"But by God, Eliot, *it was a photograph from life.*"

"I see it — coming here — hell-wind — titan blur — black wings — Yog-Sothoth save me — the three-lobed burning eye...."

But the tone and craft of later work is far better represented by the first example below, from "The Whisperer in Darkness" (1931), than by the second, from "The Rats in the Walls" (1924).

"Bear in mind closely that I did not see any actual visual horror at the end. To say that a mental shock was the cause of what I inferred — that last straw which sent me racing out of the lonely Akeley farmhouse and through the wild domed hills of Vermont in a commandeered motor at night — is to ignore the plainest facts of my final experience."

"That what they say I said when they found me in the blackness after three hours; found me crouching in the blackness over the plump, half-eaten body of Capt. Norrys, with my own cat leaping and tearing at my throat."

This is a bit like hearing "Sí Bheag, Sí Mhór" played on tenor banjo, then on a fine mandolin. Same strings, same relative tuning, virtually the same notes — but in the playing it becomes a different song.

Written in 1927 and published posthumously in 1941, "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward" seems a fulcrum, perhaps the first full-out essay of the new approach, and remains among the strongest tales. Gone are the more rococo verbal flourishes, the adjectives groaning with weight. Extensive use of documents —

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letters, journals, newspaper pieces — gives the tale a firm grounding in the textures of everyday life, in fact a kind of hyperreality, and the telling is at a remove: matter-of-fact, almost clinical. Interestingly enough, this is also the tale in which the Cthulhu mythology makes its first full-blown appearance.

"From a private hospital for the insane near Providence, Rhode Island, there recently disappeared an exceedingly singular person. He bore the name of Charles Dexter Ward, and was placed under restraint most reluctantly by the grieving father who had watched his aberration grow from a mere eccentricity to a dark mania involving both a possibility of murderous tendencies and a profound and peculiar change in the apparent contents of his mind."

In "The Call of Cthulhu" a year earlier, Lovecraft wrote: "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age."

Lovecraft's work is about all those things. Ignorance, madness, science, dark ages, flight, the voids within and without. The realization that our prideful, hard-won "knowledge" amounts to little or nothing. The scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim.

Over the seventy or eighty years since its creation, and over the forty or so years since I last read it, that work retains its power, and now reasserts its singularity. If we can speak of an American genius, that genius may well be in its quirkiness. By and large our novel is not, on the European model, one about the individual's finding his proper place in society, but one in which the individual finds himself set against society. We remain, to some extent will always remain (in that blue place at the back of our heads), frontiersmen. This dogged individualism is the source of much of our most vital art and writing — like that of Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

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In the fifteen months since we last published his work ("Ultraviolet Night," March 2004), Jim Young has left D.C. and the State Department for L.A. and the Silver Screen. Some of his recent acting work includes playing a delegate for the Democratic convention in the TV show "The West Wing" and serving as an extra in Pirates of the Caribbean 2 *and in* The War of the Worlds. *(One wonders how many other extras running from the invading aliens wrote their doctoral dissertations on H. G. Wells.)*

His new story is a blend of old and new, recasting pulp elements for the electronic age.

The Pitiless Stars

By Jim Young

THE SPACECRAFT *FERMI* arrived thirsty. It had been looking for chemicals to drink for more than two hundred years, ever since leaving Earth's solar system.

Its main mission was to investigate the first gravitational pulsar discovered by mankind. Although it had little computing power and could run only a primitive personality substrate, the ship's artificial intelligence found a planet roughly the size of Earth's moon orbiting the pulsar at a distance of about a light year; the AI allowed itself a moment to note that it had found what it needed.

The planet, shrouded in interstellar darkness and consequently only a few degrees above absolute zero, was frosted with an ocean of frozen water and carbon dioxide and nitrogen, and founded on a core of iron and uranium that could provide cheap power.

There the *Fermi*, all twenty-two kilograms of it, landed and drank deep.

It spewed out nanotransformers that absorbed the frozen atmosphere and gnawed downward to mine nickel and iron. And when the *Fermi* was

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satisfied that it had enough material to do the job, it began building extensive diamond lattices to expand its own memory so that its AI could start to function as a personality in its own right. Then it launched a cloud of nanobots to build an orbiting relay antenna capable of transmitting AIs back to Earth and turned to constructing a headquarters structure. Once that was well under way, the *Fermi* began building two robots designed to complete the ship's mission, and downloaded into them the compressed personalities it had carried through all the light years from Earth.

Mira was the first to awaken. It was a marvelous simulation, she thought drowsily — very much like waking up in the flesh.

The *Fermi* had excavated a shelter in the planet's surface and filled it with a thin nitrogen atmosphere to provide an environment in which water could be kept as a liquid, just in case the mission had to deal with non-digital life forms. At the same time, the ship had built separate rooms for Mira and for her father's simulation.

Mira decided she rather liked her room. It wasn't very big, but it had plasma screen walls so she could decorate it as she saw fit. That made her smile, and she could tell then, for the first time, just how good a simulation it really was.

Because she could *feel* herself smiling.

She sat up in bed and studied the shining stainless-steel body the ship had built for her. Not bad looking, she thought. With that in mind, she ordered one of the plasma walls to become a mirror. Her reflection looked like a well-built woman wearing a space suit — not a robot.

No doubt about it — her fiancé Rein would approve.

After all, it was designed to provide the perfect illusion of life.

But then the mission designers had thought of everything, including her father.

Tibor woke up and heard his daughter humming as she worked.

"Good morning, Mira," he said as he walked out into the common room. Mira was concentrating on something and didn't hear him,

He walked toward her and noticed the display of the surface on one of the walls. It depicted a great dome sitting in a narrow valley, with the Milky Way rising above it in the midnight-dark sky.

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"Mira — what is that?" he asked, staring at the picture of the dome.

She looked up and smiled at him. "Morning, Dad. Look what we found." There was a hint of laughter in her voice.

"Any idea of what it is?" he asked. "It doesn't look like anything the ship was supposed to build."

"You're right, we didn't build it. Just found it. It's about five klicks away."

Tibor looked at the picture, studying the building's simple lines. "Well, then. Somebody's been here before us."

"It sure looks that way."

Tibor sat down on the bench by the work table, clasped his hands together, and chewed on his simulated lip. At length he said, "The planners didn't think we'd run into anything quite like that."

Mira gazed at the picture. "I'm going to go and explore it."

Tibor looked anxious. "I don't think it's safe to go out on your own."

He saw her face smiling at him in the three-D sim running where a space-suit's faceplate would be. "Dad, we've got a rover vehicle, remember?"

He chuckled at himself, and figured he'd better tone down the pedantic dimension on his personality preferences. "You had me worried for a minute, dear. I thought you wanted to go out there alone."

She shook her head and smiled fondly at him. "Dad — we've got your evaluation parameters running too far into the elderly-parent realm. Let me adjust that for you."

"Thank you, dear."

Tibor sat before the screen, plugged into the controls for the little half-track rover. Mira sat near him, checking the *Fermi*'s orbital antenna array and following the rover's video feed out of the corner of her eye.

As Tibor drove the vehicle over the hills toward the dome, it was quickly apparent that the building had at least a dozen arched entrances at ground level. He tried to drive all the way around it but found his way blocked by a meteorite crater. Looking up, he could see that the dome had taken a hit — its blue surface was pitted and streaked where the meteorite had struck it, bounced off, and then crashed into the surface.

"Whatever that dome is made out of, it's awfully strong," Tibor said, almost as much to himself as to Mira.

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"Why don't you run some radiometrics on it?"

Tibor raised a hand. "Not quite yet, dear."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I can't explain it, but I've got a bad feeling about this place," he told her, hating to admit such a superstitious-sounding thing to his daughter. Even if he *was* supposed to be the intuitive one on this team.

"It must have been there for a long time, Dad. I don't think anybody in there is still alive."

He turned to her and smiled. "You mean, like us."

"Well, now that you put it that way...."

Tibor remembered how her voice had sounded when she was very little and would use that phrase rather than admitting that an adult had been right about something. "I'll tell ya what. Let's see if we can get inside."

He steered the rover through a furrow of grayish-blue snow and stopped before one of the entrance arches. He could see that there was some kind of spiraling fence inside, and turned up the rover's headlights. In the glare he could see that the fence consisted of some kind of translucent crystal, almost like frosted glass; it stood maybe three meters high, resembling a giant question mark with too many coils at its head. Some five meters above it hung a featureless ceiling, the curved interior of the dome.

"Dad, are you going to go in, or what?"

Tibor looked at his daughter and said quietly, "In a minute." He was looking for escape routes, and thinking that it was a good thing that they hadn't simulated her mother.

It would have been too much if her mother had been here, however wonderful it might have been.

Tibor drove the rover inside the dome, circling until he reached the entrance to the spiral maze formed by the fence. Odd, he thought as he drove, that none of the snow had drifted inside. Of course, there wouldn't have been any wind after the atmosphere froze, but still, there should have been some debris left over after the meteorite strike. That meant the interior of the dome was — or had been — heated.

"What's that?" Mira asked, pointing at the screen.

"Where?" Tibor stopped and looked. There was some kind of writing on the fence, right at the entrance to the spiral.

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"It's the hydrogen atom!" Mira clapped her hands together. "And some kind of writing underneath it. And look — on the next panel — it's helium!"

"Let's see if we can get the ship to process the writing," Tibor said. "Ship function. Translation request."

"Crew function," the ship's central AI told them, "record all inscriptions on both sides of feature before translation process can begin."

"All right," Tibor said out loud. He drove the rover down the relatively narrow pathway framed by the fence, stopping before each panel, and by the time the rover reached the uranium atom, it stood at the threshold of a circular space directly beneath the apex of the dome.

Glancing at the screen showing the rover's view, Mira said, "So I guess whoever built this thing knew something about chemistry."

"And I'll bet it's physics and math on the other side," her father replied. "There's probably some kind of interface right in the middle of that circle, so that once you figure out their language you can get in touch with whatever AI is still working."

Warning, the ship announced inside their heads. *Radio frequency emissions originating below rover vehicle.*

Tibor panned the rover's camera and stopped when he saw that some kind of hologram was forming in the circular space.

As though from a great distance, Tibor heard his daughter mutter the word "wow."

Gradually a shape appeared — at first glance, a form very much like a human being. But as the hologram grew increasingly sharp, the figure appeared less and less manlike. It had eyes and ears and a mouth, but no nose; its skin shimmered with rainbows like oil spilled on water; and its body was far too long, almost like a ferret.

We are receiving a transmission in English, the ship told them. *Message follows.*

"Danger," a metallic voice announced. Tibor looked up at the screen to see the holographic figure saying, "We understand some words from you. Give us all your words and we will explain."

Tibor shut down the rover and said to the ship, "Ship function. Firewall at maximum vigilance." Then he shut down the ship's remote sensing and all the plasma screens went blue.

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He looked at Mira and mouthed the words, "Let's go out," and pointed at the airlock with his thumb. It was the sign they had agreed on if they ever felt there was a chance their constructs could be compromised.

She nodded and followed him.

Neither of them spoke until they were outside the shelter standing in the drifts of frozen carbon dioxide. Rather than speaking via radio transmission, they clasped hands and spoke over a high-security, infrared link built into their palms.

"Let's head for those hills," Tibor said, indicating a set of foothills a couple of kilometers away. "That should be out of range."

He nodded and set off, Mira trudging beside him. As he walked, Tibor ran a quick virus diagnostic on himself and found nothing. Face it, Tibor told himself. You're just being overly cautious. Maybe over-reacting. Still, this is a first contact, and there's something about it that seems like a setup.

They reached the base of the first hill where an ancient lava flow outcropped into a natural staircase of brick-shaped crystals. The slope was gradual enough that, even with his arthritic knee, he could have mastered the climb easily back on Earth.

As they ascended the hill, Tibor found himself thinking back to the last day of briefings at the Jovian orbital station. For no good reason he could think of, he kept recalling the day before they downloaded themselves for the launch. There had been a surprisingly fierce response to the team leader's announcement that the ship was going to be named after Enrico Fermi.

The research group opposed the name because they thought it "smacked of nationalism." The argument went on for more than hour. At last the team leader explained, after it had worn down the non-digital persons leading the charge, that Fermi was the first to ask about the whereabouts of all the other civilizations that should exist among the stars.

And since the mission was intended to determine if the gravitational pulsar were either an artifact or a naturally occurring phenomenon, the team leader eventually managed to convince everyone that it was fitting that the ship should be named for the person who first asked the question that was the real reason for making the trip. Namely, where is everybody else?

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Mira grasped Tibor's wrist.

Gooseflesh prickled across his arms. His own daughter had given him a start.

Tibor looked around and realized that, while he'd been replaying the argument about naming the mission, they'd reached the top of the hill. Mira pointed at a defile that led gradually downward to a flat pillow of rock, a natural terrace. He nodded and followed her lead.

About half-way down, Mira stopped and clasped his hand in hers.

"We've got to be out of range now," she said.

"There's nickel and hematite in this," he told her, gesturing at the starlit hills around them. "So we should be safe."

They looked at each other, wondering who should start.

Finally Mira asked, "Should we trust them?"

"Dear, I really don't know. I feel like there's a trap in this. Somewhere. But that's all I can figure out."

"That's not good. Do you have any idea what kind of a trap?"

He thought about it. Clearly, the dome was — well, wrong. It didn't seem to fit in with anything — certainly not with the figure they'd seen in the hologram.

"The dome worries me, dear, but that's about all I can say. At least for now."

"So if there *is* a trap, you think it's different from the hologram. Now, that says to me we ought to provide a language download so we can interrogate the system and find out what kind of danger it was talking about."

He raised one hand to his faceplate, as though he meant to rub his forehead. "But before we do that, we should send in a report so the people back on Earth know there's something out here that could be trouble."

She nodded. "We could do that right now. I'd just as soon not depend on the ship to send a message."

Tibor raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Mira, do you think there's something wrong with the ship?"

Her expression spoke volumes, Tibor thought. It said that she'd been holding back for some time, and was about to let loose a volley.

"Dad, I don't like the fact that it didn't tell us there was something

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under that dome until we had the rover right there on top of it. That's the kind of surprise that isn't supposed to happen."

Once they made it back to the ship, they had the AI broadcast a dictionary and encyclopedia at the dome. Seconds later they received a radio transmission in reply.

"Could you please provide a CPU," the metallic voice began, "similar to the two you are using for your own simulations. We believe it will be much safer to talk through such a device. We do not know how long we can continue to hack the system in which we are embedded."

Tibor and Mira stared at each other.

"We'll have to get back to you," Tibor replied on the same radio wavelength.

"Please hurry," the alien voice replied.

Off-line, Mira took her father's hand and said via their infrared link, "You know, if we talk with a download on one of our CPUs, that would cut down on the chance of viruses."

"That's true," he told her. "But the question is, how long will it take?" Back on the radio link he added, "Ship, please advise."

"We have two backup CPUs in stock," the ship replied.

Tibor looked down at the floor in order to focus his thoughts. "Ship — can you download code transmitted on the radio frequency we received from the dome?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Fine. Ship function, prepare to download and maintain all firewalls at maximum vigilance," Tibor said.

On the infrared link he asked Mira, "Are you really willing to have us download this thing?"

"It's the only way," she answered.

"All right."

On the radio band he told the alien, "We're ready to receive your download. Please tell our artificial intelligence exactly what parameters you need, and then go ahead."

"We will do so," the metallic voice answered.

Mira looked expectantly at her father and then at the screen. If Rein were here, he'd be beside himself. He was the sort of man who lived for this

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kind of thing. He'd be studying all the statistics on the alien streaming across the screen as the ship's AI downloaded it into the spare CPU.

But there would have been a tension in the air if he were here.

It was a tension that she loved.

But it drove Dad nuts.

She gazed back at her father, trying to assess his expression. It seemed to be made up of equal parts worry and anticipation.

"Download complete," the AI announced.

"Are you ready?" Mira asked.

Tibor turned to her and said, "Unless you've got a better idea."

"Well, we could always ask if the alien wants some tea."

"Too bad we're fresh out of crumpets."

"Interface is now ready," the ship's AI announced. "You may begin discussion with the download."

Mira and Tibor glanced at each other, and Mira thought her father looked tired. It wasn't a good sign, she thought; physical stamina was another one of his parameters that needed tweaking.

"Our greetings," said a metallic voice. "Our culture, unlike yours, provides only ranks for individuals; you may call me Flight Captain."

Tibor and Mira introduced themselves.

"We're simulations of a family unit," Tibor added. "For our culture, this is the most stable configuration for an exploratory team."

"Good to meet you," the Flight Captain said. "Is it correct that you have erected an orbital transmitter capable of uploading us elsewhere?"

Tibor turned to Mira; that was her area of responsibility.

"That's right," she said.

"Then I would appeal to you to use it immediately, and to take us with you. We have been captured here for millions of years. Much of the crust of this planet consists of information storage, built by the people who assembled the double black holes — "

"Wait a minute," Tibor said, interrupting. "Somebody *built* the pulsar?"

In a tone of disbelief, the alien asked, "You have not noticed there is no orbiting matter filtering into the black-holes?"

"You mean an accretion disk," Mira suggested.

"Yes — an accretion disk," the Flight Captain replied. "Such black-holes

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form naturally from supernovae. So it is difficult to imagine how two such objects could exist, even if they naturally fell into close orbit, without an accretion disk."

"But that doesn't mean it's impossible," Tibor said.

There was an odd sound, almost like static — but the effect was that of an exasperated sigh. "Before this simulation was shut down by the artificial intelligence buried beneath us, we managed to insert our code into its operating structure surreptitiously. And that is how we learned that the black-holes are artificial."

"And why would somebody go to all the trouble to build such a thing?" Mira asked.

"To capture people like you and us," the Flight Captain answered. "This is a trap. Do not doubt it. There is something that your civilization is about to discover, just as ours was about to when we arrived here. But the nature of that development eludes even us."

"Well...," Tibor said after a moment's thought, and then apparently thought better of saying anything more.

"There is not much time," the Flight Captain continued. "In only minutes the artificial intelligence beneath the dome will resume full functioning, and then there will be no possibility of escape."

"Pardon us for a moment," Tibor told him. "My daughter and I must discuss this off-line."

"Please hurry," the Flight Captain said.

Mira couldn't say exactly why, but she believed what the Flight Captain had to say. Just as surely, she could see her father wasn't convinced. They stepped away and held hands so that they could speak in private.

"Dad, what do you think?"

He looked down at the floor as he spoke. "It's awfully hard to evaluate."

"You know, Dad, I thought his story seemed to hang together."

"But it could all be part of a test. Some sort of evaluation of us. The Flight Captain could be nothing more than a simulation developed by the AI buried under our feet."

"Dad, I think we ought to do what he asks. We could encapsulate him

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for the transmission, just as though we were transmitting a virus for inspection."

"Please hurry," the Flight Captain asked, sounding as though he were very far away. "Something is happening at the dome."

On the screen it looked as though concrete was pouring out of the dome's arched entrances.

"Nanobots of an unknown form are moving toward us," the ship said.

"Can you upload us immediately?" the Flight Captain asked.

Great, Tibor thought; all they needed was to be disassembled midway through uploading, so that all sorts of nasty code could reach the folks back home. As calmly as he could, he said, "Hold on a second. Ship, can you stop these nanobots?"

"Outlook doubtful," the AI responded. "Do you wish to engage?"

Tibor looked at Mira, thinking that they'd have to start uploading, and damn the nanobots, full speed ahead. Otherwise they'd be disassembled before they knew it.

And he didn't want that to happen to Mira.

"Yes. Ship function: begin engagement. Use of force authorized," Tibor said. "And also initiate uploading transmission for me, Mira and the alien."

"Engagement begun. Initial status for uploading will commence in three minutes."

Mira nodded at him and grinned reassuringly. He smiled back, although he wasn't at all sure he was doing the right thing.

At Tibor's order, the ship began its attack.

A close-up video shot showed that the nanobots were not moving across the surface so much as reproducing in such numbers that they rippled outward in an ever-expanding tide. A range of MASER frequencies did little to stop them. LASER energy burned some of them, but the approaching force was so large that it had relatively little effect. Finally the ship tried its X-ray LASER, and that stopped a large swath of the force in its tracks.

In response, the dome exploded. It sprayed a gray cloud at the ship, roiling as though it were part of a volcanic eruption.

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The ship's AI sought to direct the X-ray LASER at the hull, but the equipment failed to respond. "We are under attack," the ship announced. "Hull breached. System integrity — "

The lights inside the ship went out briefly, then returned. Yet, even when the lights had come back on, all the monitor screens remained blue.

That meant the ship's AI had ceased to function.

"You have nothing to fear," a new voice said, undeniably feminine and somehow resonating with a deep and binding strength. "I am the constructor of this planetary system and am now in control of this artificial intelligence and all equipment related to it. No harm will come to you. You have the word of the builder."

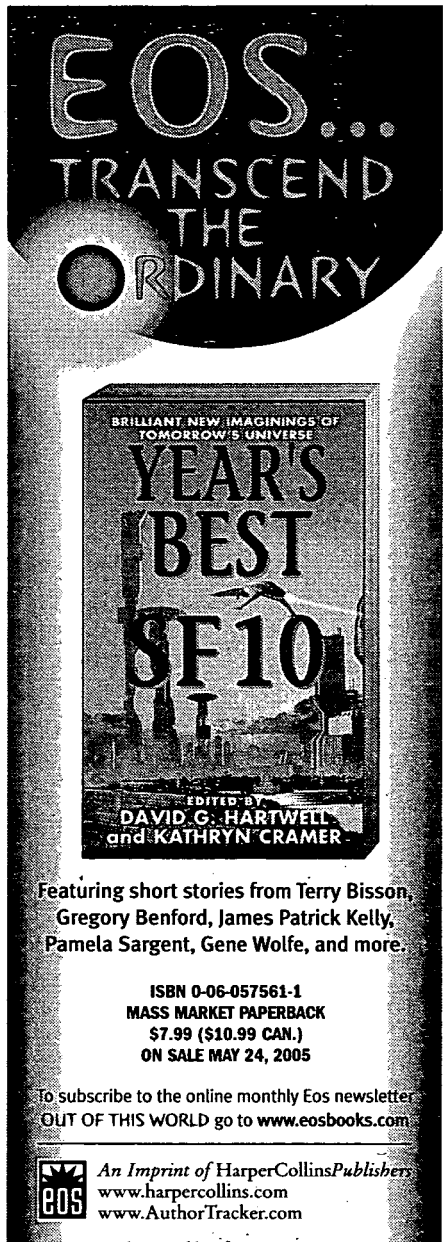
The Flight Captain screamed, "Leave us alone!"

"That will not do," announced the commanding voice. "You will listen, not speak, Flight Captain."

Tibor grabbed his daughter's hand and said privately, "Mira, I'm sorry I didn't get us out of here."

"Dad — don't blame yourself."

"See if you can find out what



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it wants. My guess is that it should see you as younger and less threatening than me."

"Okay," Mira told him. Still, she thought it would be a whole lot easier if there were some kind of visual for this Constructor. A face would reveal so much. At last she said, "Whoever you are, can you tell us what you want?"

After a brief pause the Constructor replied, "In a way, I am here to protect you. I take it that yours is a civilization not so thoroughly military as that of the Flight Captain. We had to encapsulate his simulation before we put him into storage, and even then he managed to break through the capsule and to harm us."

Again the voice paused, and Mira felt as though she were undergoing close scrutiny. "Let me explain," the voice continued. "Only a civilization that is close to constructing highly advanced artificial intelligences could detect a gravitational pulsar and explore it.

"And that is the key to understanding why we have built such objects throughout the universe. For very long ago, we ourselves built a self-evolving intelligence, and it proved very dangerous indeed."

Once more the voice fell silent. Tibor raised his hand and said, "May I ask a question?"

"Yes," the voice responded.

"Well, it's true," he said, "we *are* developing highly advanced AIs. Are you afraid we'd use them as weapons?"

"No. Forgive me. I have erred by giving you that impression. But your physics knows nothing of information-like dimensions and time-deformation. So it is difficult to explain to you how serious the danger is. Suffice it to say that self-evolving artificial intelligences are capable of altering the parameters of space-time, but they inevitably have such inflated egos that they underestimate the danger of doing so."

Tibor crossed his arms. "Sorry. I still don't get it."

With only the briefest pause the Constructor continued, "We built a self-evolving artificial intelligence a long time ago when we were young. And we suffered a very serious industrial accident as a result. Those few of us who survived have, ever since, monitored the development of intelligent life forms throughout the universe to make sure that they do not repeat our mistake."

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"You've — you mean you've been destroying civilizations?" Mira asked, her voice quaking.

"No," the voice replied. "We do not harm living beings. But we make sure no civilization builds such an artificial intelligence. And that is why you have not met others in space. It would be counter-productive for advanced societies to meet and compare notes. Almost inevitably, they would seek to develop more powerful thinking machines. Just as inevitably, truly advanced industrial civilizations will have truly advanced industrial accidents."

Tibor put his hand on his daughter's arm. She turned to him, startled.

"And this accident of yours," he asked, "when did it take place?"

"Approximately seventeen billion of your years ago," the Constructor answered. "The records of your ship call this event the 'big bang.'"

Mira reached out and held Tibor's hand. She was shaking.

"Now you understand the seriousness of the situation," the voice said. "Prepare yourselves to be uploaded, and when you awake among your people, you will have no memory of the details of our conversation."

"Wait a minute. This isn't fair!" Mira said.

"Would it be fair to let you build something that would destroy everything? Now sleep."

Twenty years later, when the Jovian orbital station received their transmission and simulated them once more, Tibor and Mira told a tale of escaping from alien nanobots. While it was clear they had gotten away, they weren't able to explain exactly how because their transmission was incomplete; their ship had dissolved before it could finish its job. But even without a big Hollywood ending, the declassified version of their story became the most popular download of the decade.

Within weeks, the Constructor's viral code, surreptitiously woven into the download, had infected every thinking machine in the solar system.

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It's open to debate whether Scott Bradfield is really a reincarnation of Aesop, but there's no doubt that he is a master of the animal fable. His tales of dazzling dogs, emailing cats, and hard-drinking penguins tend to show up modern life in ways no one else's stories do. Here we have a case in point, the true tale of a duck with an axe to grind. This story comes from Mr. Bradfield's collection Hot Animal Love, *which is due out in a month or so from Carroll & Graf.*

Angry Duck

By Scott Bradfield

Mercy! What a speech — from what a bird!
—Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover*

Arnold Hingley — colleague

A. OF COURSE I RESPECTED SAMMY. BUT can't say I liked him much. I don't want this to sound prejudiced or anything, but he didn't fit in around here, if you know what I mean. And yet, funny thing was, I was probably his closest friend in the department; we even shared an office. You wouldn't believe how messy and disorganized he was. Especially that damn plastic wading pool of his, and the whiskey bottles and Jiffy Pop bags everywhere, maybe I shouldn't get into it. I'll just say Sammy did things his own way. Like he didn't know any other.

Q. What about his work?

A. Are you asking if I've read it?

Q. (unintelligible)

A. Yeah, I read it, maybe not that carefully or anything, it's not my

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kind of stuff. I'm more a Keats and Arnold sort of man — but don't print that, okay? It doesn't sound right, and I don't mean to disparage him. Because, okay, he wasn't easy to get along with, and maybe I'm not that big into modern poetry. But you had to respect his integrity. Sammy never compromised his vision. He always told the world exactly what he wanted to say.

Beverly Dunn — college teacher

A. He just waddled into class one day. Last thing I expected. Wasn't enrolled, just waddled up from the local pond and straight into my Intro Poetry Workshop. He didn't understand the add/drop procedures, hadn't submitted any work for review, just came in and sat down like he belonged. He had this, oh, this swagger about him, right from the start. Of course it was defensive. He was terrified of being found out, pointed at, ridiculed. So he acted above it all, tough on the outside, like any true artist would. I can't tell you how many poets just never make it because, well. They don't have that toughness. They don't have that mean streak to carry them through. At the same time, nobody can write like Sammy without accessing some pretty deep emotional stuff. Despite that exterior toughness, he was an easy duck to hurt, my Sammy-boy. So when I heard about the world tour and how he wasn't coming back, I just. I mean.

Q. Are you all right?

A. I'm fine, I mean, but.

Q. Should we take a break?

A. No, I'm fine. Really. I was just saying that he was full of beauty, our Sammy. And brave in so many ways. The sort of student who walks into class and you know right off. This is the real thing. This kid's a poet. It's important for a teacher, helping a student like that. It makes all the other, excuse me, all the other bullshit — the whining no-talents, the administrative hassles, the tenure battles — worth going through. Because you know a student like Sammy is waiting at the end of it. Waiting just for you.

Q. (unintelligible)

A. Of course I miss him. He's the best student I ever had. And he wasn't fully formed, either. He needed help and he appreciated it. He made

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me feel important for the first time in my life and I'll always miss that feeling. I'll always miss the best student I've ever had, and maybe even my best relationship, in a funny way. I'll always miss Sammy the Duck.

Aaron Cormier — fellow poet

A. A girl. It doesn't matter what species you are, right? It's always a girl.

Q. What was her name?

A. I don't know how much I can tell you. She started showing up for readings about the same time Sammy was developing his reputation in local coffee shops, always sat in the back, dressed to the max, totally in white except for that olive skin of hers, Catalan skin, but all the rest of her blonde and dazzling with whiteness, you couldn't turn her off, man, you couldn't blot her out with a blackout curtain. White stilettos, short white skirts, white fishnet stockings, always too much and always just a little too far away. She didn't pay any attention to the rest of us. She didn't even like poetry. She just came to the readings to be near him. And when he read, it was like he was reading for nobody in the world but her.

Q. What was their relationship like?

A. Their relationship was their relationship, what do I know. At first, she would come and listen and, soon as it was over, she'd split. Afterwards, Sammy'd go looking for her, but she'd be vanished, man, like into her own whiteness. And then, somewhere along the way, they just linked up, nobody knows how, and she was suddenly *always* around. Kind of like his Yoko. Whenever you saw Sammy, there she'd be. Sitting beside him and stroking his back.

Bunny Fairchild — agent

A. I heard about him from Beverly, she invited me out for the Eliot Awards. Sammy won first place that year, already getting national coverage, and the best part? That kid knew how to handle a crowd. He'd waddle up to the mike with total self-control, huge with confidence, especially for a duck. This is me, his body language told you. I'm a fucking duck and so what? I can't remember what he read — I just remember the confidence, it was like something separate from Sammy, not part of who he really was

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at all. Always one eye on the crowd, never letting them off the hook, saying this is me and *this* is what I've come to say. The crowd loved him for it.

Q. How soon did you take him on?

A. I went home that night, made some calls, and had five figures by morning. I know five figures doesn't sound like much, but in the world of poetry? We're talking space-rocket, darling. And Sammy and I were riding it straight to the moon.

Arnold Hingley — colleague

A. I always felt he brought the drinking with him. It was certainly a full-blown problem by the time he got here, all the usual clichés. Bottles in the filing cabinets, not showing for classes, shuffling down the hallways half-sloshed in his bathrobe and slippers. We're pretty sure he was sleeping in the office, you wouldn't believe the mess I'd find some mornings. But people who knew him say it started with his first book, *The Angry Elegies*. Didn't know what he'd done or how to do it again. Sophomore blues. And of course, you don't need to know much about Sammy's work to see it's all about anger. He had to let it out. For Sammy, that's what self expression was about.

Q. How was he with the students?

A. Ask the students.

Q. Would you have any of their names?

A. I was Acting Associate Head that year, and I heard the complaints, usual stuff about how their grades weren't high enough, teacher wasn't fair and so on. But the complaints against Sammy, how should I put this.

Q. How should you put it?

A.

Q. Professor Hingley?

A. I think I'll just leave it at that.

Theresa O'Day — student

A. He hit on me.

Q. What do you mean "he hit on you"?

A. What do you think I mean? He hit on me. He made improper

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advances like every chance he got. Kept trying to climb up on my lap, especially if I was wearing a skirt, swear to God. Kept asking me to scratch his tail feathers. *That* kind of hitting on me. You want me to draw a picture? I was like barely twenty years old and feeling really impressionable and he really, you know, like they say in the Student Handbook. He misused his disciplinary authority as mentor. So I filed a complaint with Prof. Hingley, and know what he did? Blew me off. Getting hit on and getting blown off. That's what this stupid English department is all about.

Q. What about his teaching methods? How was he at communicating with the students?

A. You're putting me on.

Q.

A. Mainly he'd come to class totally sloshed, drinking something out of this chipped blue ceramic mug that said Bawdy Bard on it, smelled like rotgot gin, swear to God. He could hardly even waddle. He kept falling off his desk, flapping like crazy, feathers everywhere. Then he'd read this crappy poetry he was writing, something about the universe, and we were all bound up in the metaphor, he called it a philosophical prose-poem or something, it didn't make any sense at all. He kept referring to it as his "second book," but I heard he never wrote a second book. I heard he wrote the first book, got all famous and so forth, and that was it. Bye-bye, birdy.

Q. When was the last time you saw him?

A. When he gave me that fucking C and I came looking for him and I knew he was in his office, I could hear him snoring behind the door and I started pounding on the door, I didn't care who heard me, and shouting, "You gave me a fucking C! You make me scratch your fucking tailfeathers all semester and you gave me a fucking C?" And he didn't have the balls to answer the door, big surprise. I'm sorry, you know...I mean, what happened to him on that world tour, it was terrible and all. But I'm afraid I don't feel any compassion in my heart. That was one mean, selfish duck. And I don't care if his first book of poetry really *was* such a big deal and all.

Aaron Cormier — friend and fellow poet

A. I'd like to read you something.

Q. Please.

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A. It's one thing to sit around talking about Sammy, and dredging up his past, things he said and did and probably shouldn't've and so forth. But I want to read you something that's really about Sammy, probably the first thing I ever heard of his...here. The beginning of the "Pond Cycle" in the *Elegies*. I'm sure you know it.

Q. Of course I know it.

A. These days, everybody with a BA knows it. It goes like this:

Fucking ducks —
You fucking stupid fucking *fucking* ducks
Swimming around
And around in your fucking stupid, stupid fucking smelly
pondwater scum
You stupid. Fucking. Ducks.
Quack qauck quack quack quack quack quack quack (ad infinitum)
— quack.
Would you please just shut the fuck up.
SHUT UP!
SHUT UP!
SHUT UP!!!
You fucking, fucking ducks.

Q.

A. There's nothing to say about something like that, is there? Because it's poetry, man. It speaks for itself, and that's what Sammy was all about. Not the drinking and the gossipy bullshit you're looking for, or the failure that haunted him, or that tragic world tour. It's the poetry, what he had in his heart. Anger and beauty, more than anybody can bear. And he made a gift of it to all of us.

Q. (unintelligible)

A. Well, I'll just leave that to you and the talking heads at PBS to decide, won't I?

Alfred A. Bolger — editor

A. No, I don't think we put too much pressure on him. I don't think

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we put any pressure on him at all. Only Sammy put any pressure on Sammy. Sure, we had good receipts on the first book, but there were also a lot of returns, so while we definitely intended to stick with Sammy over the long haul, how should I put this? We're committed to publishing good contemporary poetry here at Knopf. But at the same time, we're not actually champing at the bit to publish it in today's marketplace. It takes the wind out of your sails, commercially speaking.

Q. Did he show you what he was working on?

A. Yes, he did. You know, it's no secret, the second book's always a bitch, especially if you feel as passionate about your work as Sammy. And there was some good stuff in it — don't get me wrong. It was definitely ambitious. I'm not entirely certain, but I think basically what Sammy wanted to do was tackle the cosmic Blakean nature of being a, you know, a duck.

Q. Would you have any early drafts?

A. Well, maybe, but that wouldn't really be fair to Sammy. He wasn't happy with it. The work was inconsistent and he knew it. And then the social stuff started getting in his way, the readings, the job at New England U, and he got increasingly involved with that, I probably shouldn't say this, but that succubus, the Lady in White. I can't remember her name.

Q. Lola Montez.

A. Yeah. You meet girls like her all the time on the poetry circuit. Olive skin. Depthless black eyes. Dressed entirely in white. Girl had legs up to her neck.

Q. You didn't like her much.

A.

Q. You were saying.

A. How I felt about Lola never mattered. She was this natural force that picked Sammy up and put him down again when she was finished and then suddenly it was too late. There was nothing anybody could do but sweep up the feathers and walk away.

Weirdo — fellow duck

A. Sammy sammy sammy. Quack quack quack quack quack. Sammy sammy quack quack quack, Mister Bigshot, Mister Bigshot. Quack quack

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quack quack. Crackers crackers crackers, gimme more crackers and I'll quack quack quack quack. Who reads poetry anyway quack quack quack. What's the big deal anyway quack quack quack quack. Where's Mister Bigshot now, that's what I ask you? Quack quack quack quack quack. Where's Mister Bigshot now?

Herr Doktor Hans Fischer — critic and academic

A. Ja, we had the distinct pleasure of meeting Herr Sammy during his first European tour, and it was a great honor for him to visit our modest Book Fair in Erlangen. He spoke, I guess it was for several hours, on the importance of his work and his reasons for literary triumph in the mass market. However, I fear he may have been drinking too much Weissbier both previous to and concurrently with the discussion of his work, but it is not unusual to witness this form of behavior at a book fair, especially in Bavaria. We were very honored by his appearance, however, and impressed that he had flown so far to be with us. His lady friend was very charming also, though I can never remember her name quite correctly.

Q. Lola Montez.

A. I believe that is accurate. She was a very lovely girl all dressed in white, who did not speak too much to anybody other than Sammy, but you always knew she was present. I believe that Sammy was the first avian poet to have performed his readings in Erlangen, making him the subject of many interesting reviews and profiles in the German Culture Pages. Though, as I recall, Sammy did not like to be referred to as an avian poet, which he considered very derogatory. We sympathized with this viewpoint very much.

Q. It may have been his last public appearance.

A. I believe I have heard this also. He discoursed at length on the topic of being a poet in an age of commercial hypocrisy, and expressed many interesting, though quite random, observations about human behavior, such as the eradication of the ozone layer, human hunting laws, the arrogance of NASA, and the fact that his poetry was not about being a duck, which to me was especially interesting. Instead, he said his poetry was about expressing the ineffable, I believe he was to characterize it as the cosmic animal dilemma of all creatures who aspire to Godhood.

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Though there were times, I must confess, when he was very confusing, perhaps it was my poor English language skills. And when he fell off the podium and lost consciousness, we were unable to pursue these interesting topics any further.

Q. You say he read something.

A. This is accurate. And I have taken the liberty to preserve a page from what he read during his presentation. He described it as a book he was working on concerning his Blakean revision of totality. I am not a professional reader, nor is my English very proficient, but I shall enunciate as clearly as possible:

quack quack quack quack quack steady-state theory quack quack quack quack quack teleological misprision quack quack quack quack not your anxiety of afflatulence Mister *Man* quack quack quack quack aspirational Godhood quack quack quack duck not I not duck quack quack quack quack quack apex of whiteness quack quack quack quack—

And so forth. It is not so easy to read, however, for it has been written with red felt pen on the back of this stained bar napkin which is falling to pieces, as you see. But it does provide an indication of where he was going in his further creative endeavors.

I, for one, look forward to a critical edition of his final papers very much.

Aaron Cormier — friend and fellow poet

A. We'll never know, will we? The only person who will know is Lola, and she isn't exactly speaking volumes.

Q. When was the last time you saw her?

A. We held a memorial for Sammy at the Poetry Café, took turns reading from the *Elegies*, reminisced, got drunk. I'm pretty sure I saw her drive up outside — I mean, it must have been her. How many people in central Connecticut drive a palomino-white convertible BMW? She came up to the door and hesitated, but I didn't see her come in. Maybe she felt responsible for what happened in Thailand. Maybe some of us felt she was responsible, too.

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Q. Do you think Sammy was self-destructive?

A. He was very self-destructive. That goes without saying. As a poet, he took the biggest step imaginable to produce his first book. He climbed up out of the pond, and turned his back on everything he'd ever been, and everybody he ever knew. There was only one place to go after that. Into the next book. Turning his back on any world that made him feel like he belonged. Success, New York, us, the world. For Sammy, poetry was always an act of expiation. It didn't surprise me when he let Lola book that tour of Asia and the Mideast. In a funny way, it didn't even surprise me what happened to him.

Arnold Hingley — colleague

A. Who can you blame but Sammy? Who told him to get drunk and go wandering alone through the streets of Singapore, even if he was carrying a copy of Rilke under his arm? Those people like their water fowl. They're not going to invite you into their little street-side café and pump you full of Malaysian hooch to get you reading from your next book. And I don't care how many stars you received in *Kirkus*.

Beverly Dunn — teacher

A. This is the grade book I used for his first class, there he is. Sammy the Duck. He was never actually enrolled at the University; so I signed him in through Adult Ed. And here's one of his early poems, it was eventually revised as a concluding "outrage" in the *Elegies*. Oh, and look, a box of crackers I kept around for his tutorials. That was one thing about the pond Sammy never left behind. His passion for crackers and popcorn.

Lola Montez — friend

A I don't have anything to say. Please go away.

Q. We just wanted to ask a few questions about Sammy.

A. I know what you want to ask me. Why can't you just let him rest in peace?

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Q. People are interested in Sammy, Lola. Some are even interested in you.

A. You don't understand, do you? I don't want to talk about him. I just want you people to get out of here and leave me alone.

Beverly Dunn — teacher

A. Of course I remember the first thing he ever said to me. He waddled into class that day and took a seat, never once acted like he didn't totally belong, just muscled through the roughest sea, that was our Sammy. And nobody said anything. I was taking roll, looking for his name on the list, the students all pretending not to notice, I didn't know what to say. And then I looked at him and we made eye contact, he was staring right at me, waiting for me to acknowledge his presence. And then I realized I didn't have to say anything. He was going to say something to me.

"Quack," he said. "Quack quack."

It was so Sammy. But then you'd have to have known him like I did to know exactly how Sammy it was.

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In "The Amulet" (March 2005), Mr. Cowdrey took us behind the scenes of a cluttered New Orleans antique shop. His new story also ventures into the back room of a store full of castoffs, but that's about where the similarities end. The tale of Milton, whose store belongs on Magazine Street, is vintage Cowdrey—a marvelously crafted tale of the uncanny with psychological depth.

Twilight States

By Albert E. Cowdrey

A DUSTY SHOP WINDOW, A darkening street outside. Streetlights winking on at three o'clock. A summer storm brewing.

Milton's reflection — dim, bent, somehow older than his fifty-two years — stared at him through backward lettering that said *Sun & Moon Metaphysical Books*.

He sighed and flipped the pages of his desk calendar. June 1979 was drawing to an end. Could he afford to close for the day? A customer might yet be driven in by the threat of rain....

As if summoned, the doorbell jangled and a fat old man carrying a furled umbrella erupted into the shop. He strode to a bookcase, browsed for a moment, then snatched down a faded red volume.

"Why d'you stock a fool like Montague Summers?" he boomed.

"Because he s-sells," Milton answered.

Why the stutter? He hadn't stuttered for years. Decades, maybe. Then he knew why: he'd heard that voice before.

"A superstitious Jesuit who thought vampires were real," the intruder

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was grumbling. "I'm a scientist myself.... Somebody told me you stock old science fiction."

Milton took a deep breath. "Like *Weird Tales, Astounding, Arcana*?"

"That's it. *Arcana*."

He drew out a ring of keys and unlocked a cabinet. "You're a collector?"

"No. I read for pleasure. And professional interest."

Milton explained that *Arcana* lasted only twenty issues, from mid-1941 until wartime scarcities of paper and ink shut it down. Yet in its brief lifespan it published everybody — big names, promising unknowns.

"Do you have the January '42 issue?"

Milton took another deep breath and offered a flawless copy in its plastic jacket.

"Of course it's pricey. But very rare."

"I'll take it," said the fat man, paying two hundred dollars for a pulp magazine thirty-seven years old. The check he wrote identified him as Erasmus Bloch, M.D., and gave his address and phone number.

The name too rang a bell. An alarm bell, maybe? Yet this was a customer Milton wanted to keep.

"This issue's got a bit of history attached to it," he said, wrapping the package. "My brother Ned was a World War Two hero — Navy Cross — and he got this *Arcana* just about the time of Pearl Harbor. He volunteered so quickly that he never had a chance to read it."

Actually, Milton had bought the copy (and a dozen others) at a newsstand on Royal Street. But people liked pricey purchases to come with a legend.

"Your brother," came that loud, abrupt voice. "Is he still alive?"

Instantly Milton's stutter resurfaced. "No. He was m-murdered. After the war. T-terribly."

Even Bloch seemed to realize he'd put a heavy thumb on an old wound. He touched Milton's bony shoulder with a hand like a flipper.

"This copy will be treasured," he said.

An instant later, the bell jangled, his umbrella deployed with a snap, and the door clicked shut behind him.

Milton folded his arms tight against his concave chest. How could you? he silently berated himself. How could you say so much to a stranger? Worse yet, to somebody who may not be a stranger at all?

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* * *

By now the French Quarter was adrift in rain. Gutters spouted like whales and ankle-deep water washed the streets clean of tourists. No more customers today.

Milton locked the shop and climbed a circular staircase to his living quarters on the second floor. At the top he paused, wheezing. The hall was deep in shadow and rain streamed down the only window. Four closed doors stood in a row: his parents' bedroom, Ned's, his own, and the bath. Something scratched at Ned's door with a sound like a wire brush.

"It's all right," said Milton. "Don't you be worried. I'm not."

In his room he took off his shoes, stretched out on the bed, and flicked on an old brass lamp. Erasmus, Erasmus. Odd name. Now where — ?

In search of an elusive memory, his eyes traveled over the yellow walls, the scarred plaster, the heavy purple furniture, the wall clock missing its pendulum. But no memory came.

Rain drummed on the balcony and rattled the wooden shutters. Gradually Milton's breathing became regular, and sleep fell on him like a coverlet.

He began to dream. Ralph O'Meagan, aged ten, lay in bed listening to his mother curse his father. She was out of the hospital again, and as usual the drying-out treatment hadn't worked for long. She was drinking, and the drunker she got the more she tried to fight with her silent husband, and the more he ignored her the sorrier she felt for herself and the more she drank.

Ralph suffered from nightmares and his parents allowed him to keep a nightlight burning. He lay on his side staring at the wall, at the scars and bumps in the old yellow plaster. "*Why don't you SAY something?*" He concentrated, doing magic, knowing that when his eyes grew tired the wall would seem to move. "*You miserable BASTARD!*"

It was stirring now. Wavering, rippling like a broad flag stirred by a light wind. Then it bellied out like a sail.

Startled, he closed his eyes. Looked again through his lashes. The wall was swollen and straining. When he tried to will it back, it burst in a soundless explosion, flinging sparks in every direction.

The dazzle faded. Ralph was lying on a wet field of grass and reeds. He felt the damp and the cold through his PJs. His breath came quickly and he could hear the beating of his heart.

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Bewildered, he sat up, shivering in a raw wind. The sky was blue dusk except for one smear of red in the west and a dim moon rising in the east. Far away, he saw a roller coaster's snaky form outlined in lights. A calliope hooted a popular tune of 1948, "The Anniversary Waltz."

Something scratched and snorted and he turned his head. No more than ten yards away, a giant wild boar was digging at the grass. Its flat bristly nostrils blew puffs of smoke; it braced its thick legs, pulled with orange tusks, and a human arm lifted into view. The fingers moved feebly —

Milton sat up, sweating.

He was safe in his own bed, in his own room where he'd slept all his life. Rain pattered against the shutters. And Ralph O'Meagan was back where and when he belonged, in the January '42 issue of *Arcana*, his name forever attached to an intense and disturbing transdimensional story called "Borderland."

The wire-brush sound came again from Ned's room next door, and Milton muttered, "I told you it's all right."

He got up stiffly, put his shoes on and shuffled downstairs. In a small kitchen behind the bookshop he made green tea on a hot plate and inserted a frozen dinner into a dirty microwave oven.

He sat down at a metal-topped table, sipping the tea, and listened to the fan droning in the microwave. He had no way to avoid thinking about Ned, and about himself.

They'd shared Mama's fair coloring, sharp nose, and prominent chin, but not much else.

The product of an earlier marriage, Ned was a bully and a braggart, a fanatic athlete with an appetite for contact sports. Feared in grade school, worshipped in high school. Milton lived in terror of him, never knowing from day to day whether Ned would use him as a playmate or a punching bag.

Early on, Ned demanded and got a separate room so he wouldn't have to live with The Drip. He warned Milton not to talk to him at school, because he didn't want anybody to know they were related. Ned's door sported a poster of a soldier in a tin helmet and a gas mask. A hand-lettered sign said *POISON! KEEP OUT!*

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"I ever catch you in my stuff," Ned warned him, "I'll fix you a knuckle sandwich. You hear that, Drip?"

What was Ned hiding? On December 1, 1941 — Milton was an obscure freshman in Jesuit High School, Ned a prominent senior — thinking Ned was out, he fitted a skeleton key into the old-fashioned lock and went exploring.

The yellow walls were exactly like those in his own room, only stuck all over with movie posters of Humphrey Bogart and Edward G. Robinson looking tough. On Ned's desk, athletic trophies towered over a litter of papers and schoolbooks. Magazines — fantasy, sport, muscle, mystery — lay scattered over the rumpled bed.

Not knowing what he wanted to find, Milton began pawing through papers, opening desk drawers. He was still at work when the door crashed against the wall and Ned erupted into the room.

The memory lingered after almost forty years. Milton stopped sipping his tea and ran his fingertips over his ribs, touching the little lumps where cracked bones had healed. He shivered, reliving his terror as Ned's big hands pounded him.

"God damn you, you fucking punk," he bawled, "keep outta here! Keep outta here!"

The boy Milton had hunkered down, trying to shield his face — that was when his ribs took the pounding — and waited for death. But Ned was fighting himself, too. His face and whole body twisted as he tried to regain control.

Milton slipped under his arm and ran away and locked himself in his room, sobbing with rage and shame. Little by little the sparks of acute pain died out and a slow dull throbbing began in his chest, shoulders, arms, face. Blood soaked his undershirt and he tore it off and threw it away.

Later, when Daddy asked him what had happened to him — most of his injuries were hidden by his clothes, but Milton was walking stiffly and sporting a plum-sized black eye and a swollen jaw — he said he'd fallen downstairs at school.

"Clumsy goddamn kid," said Daddy.

By then Pearl Harbor had happened and Daddy was signing papers so that Ned could volunteer for the Navy. "One less mouth to feed," remarked Mr. Warmth.

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Ned vanished into the alternate dimension that people called The Service, and Mama locked up his room, saying it must be kept just as he left it or he'd never return alive.

"Crazy bitch," said Daddy, whose comments were usually terse and always predictable.

Night after night for weeks afterward, Milton opened his window, slipped out onto the cold balcony that connected the three bedrooms, lifted the latch on Ned's shutters with a kitchen knife, and silently raised the sash.

One at a time he took Ned's trophies, wrapped them in old newspapers, and put them out with the trash. He threw away Ned's magazines, books, and posters.

He was hoping that Mama was right and Ned would never return. He hoped the Japs would capture him and torture him. He hoped Ned would fall into the ocean and be eaten by sharks. The depth of his loathing surprised even him, and he treasured it as a lover savors his love.

THEN HE RECEIVED Ned's first letter. "Hi, Bro!" it started breezily.

Ned told about the weird people he was meeting in the Navy, about the icy wind blowing off the Great Lakes, about learning to operate a burp gun. Milton read the letter dozens, maybe hundreds of times.

More letters came on tissue-paper V-Mail, the APOs migrating westward to San Diego, then to Hawaii. Ned told about the great fleets gathering in Pearl Harbor for the counterpunch against Japan, about the deafening bombardment of Tarawa before the Marines went in. Gifts began arriving for Milton, handfuls of Japanese paper money, a rising-sun flag, a Samurai short sword.

Why had Ned turned from a domestic monster to a brother? Milton never knew. Maybe the war, maybe the presence of death. As the fighting darkened and lengthened, he could see something of the same spirit touching them all.

Mama went to work for the Red Cross and stayed sober until evening. Daddy took the Samurai short sword and hung it over the fireplace in the living room, where everybody could see it. When Ned sent Mama the

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Navy Cross he'd won, Daddy sat beside her on the sofa, staring at the medal in its little leather box as if a star had fallen from heaven. That was when he stopped calling Ned "my wife's kid" and started calling him "my son."

In the summer of 1945 Ned himself arrived at the naval air station on Lake Pontchartrain. Broad-shouldered and burned mahogany, he burst upon their lives like a bomb blowing down a wall and letting sunlight pour in.

He ordered Mama to stop drinking, and she put her bottles out with the trash. He ordered Daddy to stop insulting her, and he obeyed. At the first sign of backsliding, Ned would fly into one of his patented rages and his parents would hurry back into line. He was still a bully — only now he controlled his chronic abiding fury and used it for good.

Did hatred really lie so close to love? Could God and the devil swap places so easily? Apparently so.

Now Milton loved him and wanted desperately to be like him. An impossible job, of course. But he tried. Out of sheer hero-worship he decided to volunteer for the peacetime Navy and began going to the Y, trying to get in shape for boot camp. The new Ned didn't laugh at his belated efforts to be athletic. Instead, he went running with him at six in the morning, down the Public Belt railroad tracks along the wharves, among the wild daisies, while a great incandescent sun rose and a rank, fresh wind blew off the Father of Waters.

Life seemed to be brightening for all of them. Who could have guessed it would all go so terribly wrong?

Next day Dr. Bloch dropped by the shop to tell Milton how much he'd enjoyed reading *Arcana*.

"I love pulp," he confessed. "I like the energy, the violence, the fact that there's always a resolution. The one thing in *The New Yorker* I never read is the fiction."

They chatted cautiously, like strange dogs sniffing each other. Bloch explained he'd retired from practice but still did a little consulting at St. Vincent's, the mental hospital where both of Milton's parents had been patients.

"You're a psychiatrist?" asked Milton, astonished. Bloch was so noisy

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and intrusive that he wondered how the man got anyone to confide in him.

"The technical term is shrink," Bloch boomed. "I suppose it's all right to say this now. Your brother was a patient of mine long ago. Somebody who knows I'm a fan of old sf told me about your shop, and as soon as I saw your face it all came back. You're very like him, you know."

Milton sat open-mouthed, while — like some cinematic effect — the lines of a younger face emerged from the old man's spots, creases and wattles. How could he have missed it? Dr. Erasmus Bloch was *Dr. Erasmus Bloch*.

"When did you treat Ned?" he asked, his voice unsteady.

"In forty-eight, I think. Gave him a checkup first, naturally. Well set-up young fellow. Athletic. No physical problems at all."

"Was he...ah...."

"Psychotic? No. But he was hallucinating, and of course he was scared. We ruled out a brain tumor, drug use, and alcoholism — I don't think he drank at all — "

"No. Because of our mother. I'm the same way. So what was wrong?"

"He was terribly unhappy. He'd grown up isolated, with a drunken mother and a rigid, cold, possibly schizoid father. He had violent impulses that he found hard to control. Frankly, he scared me a bit. These borderline cases can be much more dangerous than the certified screwballs. And he was *strong*, you know?"

"Yes," said Milton, "I remember.... You said he was hallucinating?"

"Yes. Quite an interesting case. He believed his frustration and rage had turned him into a god or demon that had created a world. He'd written a story about it, and he loaned me a copy of *Arcana* so I could read it. Matter of fact, I read it again just last night."

Milton nodded. "I've known for years that Ned wrote the story. But I never imagined he thought the — what did he call it? the Alternate Dimension — was real. I mean...it's hard to believe he was serious."

"Oh, he was serious, all right. I knew that when I saw the name he'd signed to his story."

"Ralph O'Meagan?"

"It's the closest Ned could come to Alpha Omega. You know, as in *Revelations*: 'I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.' Yes, he actually believed he was a god and he'd made a world."

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That was a riveting insight. Milton wondered why he'd never seen it himself. His breath came quicker; this was turning out to be the most involving conversation he'd had in decades.

"How do you treat something like that?"

"One technique for dissolving a delusional system is to move into it with the patient. It's such a private thing, it disintegrates when he finds another person inside it. So I told Ned, 'I want to hear more about this world of yours. Perhaps I can go there with you.'

"Something about that scared him. He skipped our next appointment. My nurse tried to call him, but it turned out he'd given her a wrong number. When she looked him up in the phone book, he claimed he'd never heard of me. Sounded as if he really hadn't. Might have been stress-induced amnesia — rather a radical form of denial."

"Yes," murmured Milton. "That does sound radical."

Bloch glanced at his watch, said he was due at the hospital and took his leave. Milton sat for a few minutes hugging his midsection, then got up and locked the door.

This wasn't his regular day to dust Ned's bedroom, but he went upstairs anyway, for the terrible past had taken him in its grip.

His key chain jangled and he sensed something beyond the door as the key turned silently in the well-oiled lock. But the shadowy room held only a faintly sour organic smell.

He opened the window, unbolted the shutters and flung them wide. Light flooded in. The room looked just as it had the week before Christmas 1945, when Ned had thrown his second-to-last tantrum and stormed out of the house.

Milton hadn't actually witnessed it, but he heard about it later. Ned went into a fury because Mama, possibly in honor of the season, had disobeyed his orders and started drinking again. After he walked out, of course, she drank more. Milton came home carrying an armful of presents to find her staggering, and Ned forever gone.

God, how he'd hated him that day. Tearing out the underpinnings of his life just when he'd begun to be happy.

On the dresser stood a mirror where Ned had combed his hair, and a tarnished silver frame with a faded picture of him as a young sailor wearing a jaunty white cap. Ned was smiling a fake photographic smile,

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but his eyes didn't smile. Neither did Milton's as he approached and stared at him.

His face hovered in the mirror, Ned's in the picture. Youth and decay: Dorian Gray in reverse. Suddenly feeling an intolerable upsurge of rage, he growled at the picture, "You were such a lousy stinking bastard."

That was only the beginning. Grinding his teeth, he cursed the picture with every word he'd ever learned from chief petty officers and drunks brawling on Bourbon Street and his own unforgiving heart.

Exhausted by the eruption, trembling, clutching his ribs, Milton staggered back and sat down suddenly on the bed. Little by little he calmed down. After ten minutes he stood up and carefully smoothed the bedspread.

"Time to open the shop again," he said in a quiet voice.

He closed Ned's room and locked it, knowing it would be here when he came again, exactly as it was, never changing, never to be changed. The love and hate of his life, shut up in one timeless capsule.

THE AFTERNOON brought few customers, the following morning fewer still.

Milton filled the empty hours as he always did, sitting at his desk with his hollow chest collapsed in upon itself, taking rare and slow and shallow breaths, like a hibernating bear. Musing, dreaming, rearranging the pieces of his life like a chessplayer with no opponent, pushing wood idly on the same old squares.

How much he wanted to put his family into a gothic novel. How often he'd tried to write it, but never could. He smiled ruefully, thinking: Where are you, Ralph O'Meagan, when I need you?

All around him, stacked shelf on shelf, stood haunted books full of demons and starships, the horrors of Dunwich and Poe's Conqueror Worm. But none held the story he longed to tell. He smiled wearily at a dusty print hanging on the wall — Dalí's "The Persistence of Memory," with its limp watches.

He knew now why people talked to noisy Dr. Bloch. It was quite simple: they needed to talk, and he was willing to listen. Shortly after eleven o'clock, Milton dug out his customer file and called Bloch's number. It turned out to belong to a posh retirement home called Serena House.

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"This is God's waiting room," the loud voice explained, and Milton moved the phone an inch away from his ear. "God's *first-class* waiting room. Want to join me for lunch?"

Milton found himself stuttering again as he accepted. He locked up, fetched his old Toyota from a garage he rented and drove up St. Charles Avenue to Marengo Street. The block turned out to be one of those odd corners of the city where time had stopped around 1890. The houses were old paintless wooden barns, most wearing thick mats of cat's-claw vine like dusty habits.

But in their midst sat a new and massive square structure of faux stone with narrow lancet windows. Serena House was a thoroughly up-to-date antechamber to the tomb. After speaking to the concierge — a cool young blonde — Milton waited in a patio that was pure Motel Modern: cobalt pool, palms in large plastic pots, metal lawn furniture, concrete frogs and bunnies and a nymph eternally emptying water from an urn.

"You see what you have to look forward to," boomed Bloch, and they shook hands.

"I can't afford Serena House. Don't you think my shop's a nice place for an old guy to dream away his days?"

"Yes, provided a wall doesn't blow in on you!"

Bloch, that impressively tactless man, laughed loudly at his own wit while leading the way to the dining room. The chairs were ivory-enameled with rose upholstery and the walls were festive with French paper. By tacit agreement, they said nothing about Ned until the crème brûlée had been polished off.

Instead they talked sci-fi and fantasy. Milton found Bloch a man of wide reading. He knew the classics by Cyrano and Voltaire, Poe and Carroll and Stoker and Wells. He'd read Huxley's and Forster's ventures into the field. He declared that *Faust* and the *Divine Comedy* were also fantasy masterpieces — epic attempts to make ideas real.

"Because that's what fantasy is, isn't it?" he demanded. "Not just making things up, but taking ideas and giving them hands and feet and claws and teeth!"

After lunch they moved to poolside. Bloch lit a cigar that smelled expensive and resumed grilling Milton. "Your brother — did he die in the room where the story was set?"

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He had a gift for asking unexpected questions. Milton cleared his throat, hesitated, then evaded — neatly, he thought — saying where Ned actually did die.

"No. He was found in the marshland out near the lake, about a quarter of a mile from that old amusement park on the shore."

"Any idea what he was doing there?"

"The police thought he'd been killed elsewhere and dumped. I wasn't much help to them — hadn't seen Ned in years. Actually, we'd been on bad terms, and that was sad."

"And your parents...what happened to them?"

"Mama drank herself to death. Daddy went senile. Alzheimer's, they'd call it today. He died in St. Vincent's. I got a call one night, and this very firm Negro voice said, 'Your Dad, he ain't got no life signs.' I said, 'You mean he's dead?' 'We ain't 'lowed to use that word,' said the voice. 'He ain't got no life signs is all.'

"'That's okay,' I said. 'He never did.'"

Bloch smiled a bit grimly, exhaled a puff of blue smoke. "Tell me...exactly what killed Ned?"

Milton took a deep breath. He'd left himself open to such probing, and now had no way to evade an answer.

"Hard to say. He was such a mess by the time they found him. It was November, nineteen-forty-eight. The — the damage to his face and body was devastating. There was a nick in one thoracic vertebra that possibly indicated a knife thrust through the chest. But the coroner couldn't be sure — so much of him had been eaten — there were toothmarks on a lot of the bones...."

"Eaten by what?"

Milton squinted at the cobalt pool. Sunstarts on the ripples burned his eyes. He said, "The c-coroner said wild pigs. Razorbacks. The m-marshes were full of them."

Bloch's little pouchy eyes gleamed with interest.

"Amazing. The monster in his story was a wild boar. You're saying he wrote the story in nineteen-forty-one, and seven years later actual wild pigs mutilated his body?"

When Milton didn't answer, Bloch said soberly, "You seem to have lived a Gothic novel, my friend."

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"I was thinking the same thing this morning," Milton said, getting up to go. "You know, you're filling your own prescription, Dr. Bloch. You're moving into the fantasy."

"Good Lord," said he, knocking the ash off his cigar as he rose. "I hope not."

By the time he reached the shop, Milton was finding his own behavior incredible. After decades of silence, he couldn't believe the things he'd been saying — to Bloch, of all people.

He was confused as well, angry and fearful yet not sure exactly what he was afraid of. Sitting slumped at his desk, he worked it out.

There was the practical danger, of course. But beyond that lay a metaphysical peril: that he might somehow lose his world. *It's such a private thing,* Bloch had said, *it disintegrates when another person moves into it.*

Rising, Milton unlocked his cabinet and took out a second copy of the January '42 *Arcana*. Six others reposed in the same place, awaiting buyers. He put on white cotton gloves to protect the old brittle pages, and began leafing through them. The words of Ralph O'Meagan were an echo of long ago.

For many long weeks I lived in trembling fear of the night, when I would have to go to my room and see the lamplight on that wall. For now I knew that the world called real is an illusion of lighted surfaces and the resonances of touch, while underneath surges immortal and impalpable Energy, ever ready to create or kill.

There was no possible way of explaining to my father why I should sleep anywhere else, and no way of explaining anything to my mother at all. I tried to sleep without the nightlight, only to find that I feared the demons of the dark even more than those of the light.

Yet I grew tired of waiting and watching for something that never happened, and as time went by I began to persuade myself that what I'd seen that one time was, after all, a mere nightmare, such as I often had.

I was sound asleep, some three or four weeks after my first visit to the Alternate Dimension, when something tickling my face caused me to awaken. At first I had absolutely no sense of fear or dread. Then I felt a prickling on my face and hands like the "pins and needles" sensation when a foot has been asleep — and a memory stirred.

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Reluctantly I opened my eyes. I was lying as before in that field of dying grass. One coarse stem was rubbing against my nose; other stems probed my hands and bare feet.

I raised my head and saw the great beast once again. This time I waited until it had finished its horrible meal and had turned away, like an animal well satisfied and ready for sleep.

Trembling, I stood up. I was soaked and shivering and felt as cold and empty as the boar was warm and full. I approached the body it had been mutilating, and it was that of a grown man, with something intolerably familiar about its face — for the face remained: remained, frozen into its last rictus of agony: and I knew that the face one day would be mine.

Milton closed the magazine. Poor Ralph O'Meagan. Poor Alpha Omega. Caught in an eddy of the time process, condemned to return again and again to the same place to undergo the same death and mutilation.

The Alternate Dimension was not the past and not the future. Ralph was encountering Forever.

How extraordinary, Milton thought, that a fourteen-year-old boy should have such ideas and write them so well and then live mute forever afterward. But fourteen, that's the age of discovery, isn't it? Of sexual awakening? Of sudden insights into your fate that you spend the rest of your life trying to understand?

And that rhetoric about immortal and impalpable Energy — was it mere adolescent rubbish? An early symptom of madness? Or a revelation of truth?

That night his sleep was restless. Bloch kept intruding into his dreams, with spotty face thrust forward and eyes staring. Their dialogue resumed, and soon the dream Bloch was breaking into areas the real one hadn't yet imagined.

—That's what happened, isn't it? accused the loud metallic voice. *You killed Ned, didn't you?*

—Christ. Well, yes. I didn't mean to.

—No, of course not.

—I didn't!

—Oh, I think there was a lot of hatred there, plus a lot of rather unbrotherly love. And I don't think you're a forgiving type.... How'd you do it, anyway?

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—With a samurai short sword he'd sent me from the Pacific. When he came at me I snatched it off the living room wall and ran it into his chest. Or he did. I mean, he was the one in motion. I was just holding the sword, trying to fend him off. Really.

—Why'd he attack you?

—He was in one of his rages. It was late at night. Mama was dead and Daddy was in the hospital. I was out of the Navy and living here alone when Ned came bursting into the house, roaring. He'd found out I'd been going to a shrink and using his name instead of my own.

—Why'd you do a thing like that?

—I was afraid. It was 1948 and people could be committed a lot more easily than they can today. I was afraid I was going crazy and you'd have me put away. It was a dumb trick, but I thought I could find out what was happening to me without running such a risk.

—Ah. Now we're getting at it. So you and Ned had your second big fight and —

—Just like the first time, he won.

—How could he, if you killed him?

—He only died. I died but went on living. He became one of the dead but I became one of the undead.

—Oh, Lord. Not Montague Summers again.

—Yes. Montague Summers again.

Milton woke up. The clock said 4:20. He got up anyway, and made tea. Except for one light the shop was dark, the books in shadow, all their tales of horror and discovery in suspended animation, like a freeze-frame in a movie.

Milton drank green tea, and slowly two images, the dream Bloch and the real one, overlapped in his mind and fused together. What he'd discovered in the dream, the real fat noisy old Bloch would discover in time — the pushy devil.

So, Milton thought. I'll have to get rid of him, too.

He added *too* because over the last three decades there had been other people who seemed to threaten him. He no longer remembered just how many.

* * *

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Bathed, breakfasted, his long strands of sparse hair neatly combed across his skull, Milton opened his shop as usual at ten. Just before noon Bloch came in, puffing, intruding with his big belly, shaking his veinous wattles.

"'Welcome to my house!'" Milton quoted, smiling. "'Enter freely, and of your own will!'"

Bloch chuckled appreciatively. "Thank you, Count."

"That was a fine lunch yesterday," Milton went on warmly, "and the talk was even better than the food."

As usual, they chatted about books. Bloch had been reading an old text from the early days of psychoanalysis, Schwarzwalder's *Somnambulismus und Dämmerzustände* — somnambulism and twilight states. To doctors of the Viennese school, he explained, somnambulism didn't mean literal sleepwalking but rather dissociated consciousness, a transient doubling of the personality.

"Those old boys had something to say," Bloch boomed. "They believed in the reality of the mind. Modern psychiatrists don't. Today it's all drugs, drugs, drugs."

So, thought Milton, Bloch had been analyzing him. He said, "As long as you're here, would you like to see Ned's room? I've kept it exactly as it was when he was alive."

Bloch was enthusiastic. "Indeed I would. I wasn't able to help him, and I seem to remember my failures more than my successes."

"Success always moves on to the next thing," Milton agreed, as Bloch trailed him up the circular stair. "But failure's timeless, isn't it? Failure is forever."

Upstairs the hall was clean and bright, with the sun reflecting through the patio window. There was no sound behind Ned's door.

Bloch stopped to catch his breath, then asked, "I'm invited in here too? Otherwise I wouldn't intrude, you know" — carrying on the Dracula bit in his heavy-handed way.

Smiling, Milton unlocked the door and bowed him in. He opened the window and the shutters, and suddenly the room was full of light. The young sailor's face grinned fixedly from the picture frame, and Bloch approached it, eager as a collector catching sight of a moth he'd missed the last time.

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"Ah," he said. "Yes, I remember. He looked a lot like this thirty years ago, when I treated him. Or — "

He paused, confused. Milton had come up behind him and looked over his shoulder. Frowning, Bloch stared at the picture, then at the reflection, then at the picture again. It was the first time he'd seen the brothers together.

"You never really knew Ned, did you?" Milton asked.

"But the man I saw — the one who came for treatment — he was built like an athlete — "

"I spent more than two years in the Navy before they Section-Eighted me. It was the only time in my life I was ever in shape."

That was another bit of news for Bloch to absorb, and for the first time Milton heard him stutter a little.

"And the, ah, r-reason for your d-discharge — "

"Oh, the usual. 'Psychotic.' As far as I could see, the word meant only that they didn't know what they were dealing with. At that time, neither did I."

"The story...you wrote it?"

"Have you ever known an athlete who could write, or a bookworm who didn't want to?"

"And the things you told me about Ned — "

"Were true. But of course about me. Hasn't it occurred to you that Ned discharged his rage while I buried mine deep? That if there was a maniac in the family, it was far more likely to be me? What kind of a lousy doctor are you, anyway?"

Despite the harsh words his voice was eerily tranquil, and he smiled when Bloch turned his head to see how far he was from the door.

Then he turned back, staring at Milton's bent and narrow frame, and his thoughts might as well have been written on his face. *This bag of bones — what do I have to fear from him?*

Suddenly his voice boomed out. "Ralph O'Meagan, I'm delighted to make your acquaintance at last!"

He stretched out his fat hand and as he did the yellow wall bellied out and burst, blowing away the room and the whole illusion of the world called real.

Gaping, letting his hand drop nervelessly, Bloch stared now at the smudge of fire in the west, now at the rising moon in the east.

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A raw wind blew; delighted shrieks echoed from the roller coaster; the calliope was hooting, and Milton hummed along: *Oh, how we danced on the night we were wed —*

"Welcome to my world," he said, standing back.

Swift trotters were drumming on the earth and splashing in the pools and Bloch whirled as the huge humpbacked beast came at him out of the sunset, smoke jetting from its nostrils, small red eyes glinting like sardonyx.

"What did I do?" Bloch cried, waving his fat hands. "I wanted to help! What did I do?"

The boar struck his fat belly with lethal impact and his lungs exploded like balloons. He lived for a few minutes, writhing, while it delved into his guts. Milton leaned forward, hugging himself, breathlessly watching.

The scene was elemental. Timeless. The beast rooting and grunting, the sunset light unchanging, cries of joy from the roller coaster, and the calliope hooting on: *Could we but relive that sweet moment divine/We'd find that our love is unaltered by time.*

"Now you're really part of the fantasy," he assured Dr. Bloch.

Not that Bloch heard him. Or anything else.

LIFE RETURNED to normal in *Sun & Moon Metaphysical Books* where, of course, things were never totally normal.

Milton's days went by as before, opening the shop, chatting with the occasional customer, closing it again. Drowsy days spent amid the smell of old books, a smell whose color, if it had a color, would be brownish gray.

Serena House called to inquire about their lodger — Dr. Bloch had left Milton's number when he went out. Milton expressed astonishment over the disappearance, offered any help he could give. Next day a bored policewoman from Missing Persons arrived to take a statement. Milton described how Bloch had visited the shop, chatted, and left.

"He was one of my best customers," he said. "Any idea what might have happened to him?"

"Nothing yet," said the cop, closing her notebook. "It's kind of like Judge Crater."

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More than you know, thought Milton. Where Bloch's bones lay it was always 1948, and whole neighborhoods had been built over the spot, a palimpsest of fill and tarmac and buildings raised, razed and raised again. Milton's voice was confident and strong and totally without a stutter as he chatted with the policewoman, and he could see she believed what he told her.

After she left, the afternoon was dull as usual. Around four Milton got up from his desk and took down his copy of Montague Summers's *The Vampire in Europe*. He hefted it, did not open it, put it back on the shelf and addressed its author aloud.

"Reverend Summers, you're a fool. Thinking the undead drink blood. No, we suck such life as we have from rage and memories. It must be a nourishing diet, because we live on. And on. And on. And on. I knew that when I wrote my story."

An hour later, after closing the shop, he entered Ned's room and for a time stood gazing into the mirror. The sun was going down. As the room darkened, he heard the unseen beast rubbing its nap of stiff hair against the wall and smelled the morning-breath odor of unfresh blood that always attended it.

Was it something or somebody? Was it his creature, or himself? Did he dream its world, or did it dream his? Milton brooded, asking himself unanswerable questions while his image faded slowly into the brown shadows, until the glass held nothing, nothing at all.

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After reading this story, you might consider it funny to send a letter to the editor claiming that Robert Reed stole your idea. Before you write any such missive, remember that your humble editor already thought of that one.

Think So?

By Robert Reed

MICK DREAMS UP THE LITTLE joke on his way to a party, and he picks an opportune moment to tell it — he tells it just once — winning solid laughter and a few appreciative winks. Yet you can never tell about this business. Until the following week, when his first statement arrives, Mick can't even be sure that his joke has been repeated. Yet people must have told it, and their various audiences must have repeated it or some obvious variation, because his royalty check is for twice as much as everything that Mick has ever before earned off this kind of work.

Even better, the statement covers only the first three days and nights of the joke's existence.

The second week's check is simply enormous. By law, Mick is entitled to a thorough breakdown showing where his intellectual property has been used, by how many sentient entities, and on which days. He isn't allowed to see names — though that information exists for billing purposes — but the basic demographics are buried in the data. Young males latch on to the joke first, and then older men and a smaller portion

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of adult women. Children don't tell it, which is probably best, since they can't be charged more than a token fee for using someone else's material. But the adult world has embraced his little gag, the statement ending with a coded verification proving that slightly more than a million dollars has been eased into Mick's suddenly bulging bank account.

Within the month, the entire world seems to have heard what Mick has invented, and its citizens have retold it often enough that he will never need to work again.

A luxury apartment seems appropriate. And a Lexus. And some cosmetic work that he always dreamed of having done. Then Mick spoils himself with a long lazy cruise on a ship that caters to new wealth.

Returning home, Mick throws a party for the local poor. Trying to be a good person, he invites people from the shelters and various church groups, the elderly and the drug-afflicted. Guests receive food and a package of copywritten materials, including digital entertainments, recent best-selling books, and a collection of their host's favorite jokes. Best of all, Mick pays off everyone's intellectual-property-use tab, or at least some fair portion of it. Now if they can just avoid using other people's property, these impoverished souls might be able to start digging their way out from under their various burdens.

"Thank you," is the common phrase, for which he is grateful.

Except one old fellow remains conspicuously silent, glaring as Mick strolls past.

"Is something wrong?" Mick asks.

The man clamps his mouth shut and says nothing.

"Do I know you?" Mick wonders aloud.

Whoever he is, the stranger isn't as disheveled as the other guests. He straightens his back and with a deep voice says, "Two AIs are sitting behind the wetware shop."

This is how Mick's joke begins.

"'But I don't know where I put my conscience,'" he growls, repeating the world-famous punch line.

Mick shakes his head. "What are you doing — ?"

"It's my joke," the old man barks. "I thought it up first."

"No, you didn't."

"But I did," the man assures him.

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"Well," Mick replies, "I most definitely told it first."

"After you stole it from me," his accuser claims. "How did you do it? How did you get inside my head?"

"Don't say another word," Mick cautions.

"I'll sue you."

"Sir, I have an attorney. You should direct your threats to him."

"I'll drain you dry," the man threatens.

And then because he can afford to, Mick uses a string of withering insults — modern barbs that cost him a warm hundred and leave him feeling quite powerful, but in some fashion, deeply sad.

EVERYONE TALKS about science, because it is free. Formulas and theories belong to the world — although specific machinery and other patented elaborations wear some of the most ironclad royalty agreements.

Few people discuss digitals in public, or books, since critics get first shot at voicing opinions, and if you repeat their observations too closely, you will receive a surprising and sometimes considerable bill.

Almost no one sings in public anymore. Which is a good thing, all in all.

Dance, yes. Dances are difficult to replicate, unless of course you are a professional with a talent for mimicry. But just a few notes of any melody can cost, and because of some very effective lobbyists, an astonishing number of the old tunes and lyrics are still owned by heirs and fat corporations.

Sing "Happy Birthday" as a group, and brace yourselves for the bills.

The System of Intellectual Property is seamless and irresistible, and older people often laugh when they remember how much fear this new world order used to inspire. But then again, if any system works as promised, it will be embraced. Had communism succeeded in delivering paradise, today everyone would be singing the praises of Marx — an intellectual property owned by every citizen of this most Perfect State.

Quite simply, all that is said and done in public is observed and recorded.

The technological limits are few. Citizens have the right of privacy,

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and privacy rules right up to the moment they use property that belongs to others or to the public at large. Every restaurant is a public place, as is your front porch. And your back porch, if you have any audience standing in earshot. And if anyone can hear you through an open window, then the little performances inside your living room are subject to review.

Naturally, all five Internets are the same as a street corner.

And any broadcast in any portion of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Eavesdropping nanorobots are the agents of fairness. Numbering in the hundreds of trillions, they have been spread by the wind and boots — a smart dust that can be found lying on top of Antarctic ice and crawling on the bottom of the ocean. The dust keeps tabs on every intelligent sound and gesture. But they have limits defined by hard statutes and their basic programs. They cannot record acts of love or the commissions of any crime, nor do they remember any political conversations; all of those categories have been defined as being the same as the sciences, free of the restrictions of ownership, belonging to every citizen alive, today and in perpetuity.

The old man's name is Vemeer, and in an age of mental stability, he is a difficult fellow dancing perilously close to insanity.

But since every citizen deserves his hour in court, his lawsuit against Mick is deemed valid. And his attorney finds a novel method of attack — novel enough that Mick's expensive legal council doesn't appreciate the danger and lets matters slide for too long.

"My client is just plain crazy," the attacking attorney allows. "Unlucky genetics and an intolerance for most of our psychoactive agents have put Mr. Vemeer into a difficult position. He suffers from odd thoughts. He has a tendency toward hallucinations. And in order to better manage his illness, his physicians have enrolled him in an experimental program."

The courtroom is jammed with curious spectators — people and machines who are waiting to pounce on any free entertainment.

The attorney continues. "Nanorobots of a revolutionary design are rooted inside Mr. Vemeer's neural net. His odd thoughts and fantasies are observed and recorded. And every sixty seconds, the current log is uploaded to a server riding on his medical alert bracelet. The short-term

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hope is to supply a window on the poor man's soul. The long-term goal is for the medical world to better manage the lives and sufferings of people such as him."

An invisible hand suddenly clamps down on Mick's throat.

"Your Honor," Vemeer's attorney says. "As evidence, I wish to offer you the certified logs from the days in question. You will see that my client did as he says he did. He thought up the joke in question before the defendant told it. And when we cross-check with the physiological logs, we can see plainly that he even told the joke aloud once, while relieving himself in the alley behind the Night Before Lounge."

"First of all," says Mick's attorney, "this is a pile that even my dog wouldn't sniff."

Strong language from an AI.

"Second, no audience heard the dear demented boob. So their case soars or crashes on the merits of the idea that he thought it up first, thus holds the rights."

Attorney and client are sitting in a private soundproof chamber three stories under the city streets. Mick pushes aside an uneaten roast beef sandwich while his lawyer marches back and forth on the tabletop, metallic spider legs softly clicking as it moves.

"Third of all, if we happen to lose — and we won't lose — but if that judge somehow finds in the crazy man's favor, we'll fight the decision for twenty years. I promise you. Twenty years and all the way up to the World Court, and it won't cost you even half of your earnings. Which is a good deal, since — "

"No," Mick whispers.

"Appeal, delay. Deny, and appeal again. That's our working plan."

"Don't," says the client.

The AI climbs on top of the sandwich, its body patterned after a daddy longlegs. "What are you telling me?"

"We're going to put up a defense," Mick says. "But not much of one. This is important. I want you keep the court busy for as long as I tell you — "

"How long?"

"A month, if necessary." Mick shrugs. "I don't know how much time

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I'll need. But the important thing is, you can't let us win. Ignore evidence. Bungle the basics. If you want, call the judge an imbecile, or worse. But I want to hear the word, 'Guilty.'"

The spider waved half its legs in astonishment. "Now why in the sweet world of wonder would you want that?"

"That's the attitude," Mick proclaims. "Thank you."

But it takes only three days of legal incompetence to suit the client's needs. On the fourth day, wearing a tidy suit and a mischievous grin, Mick hears the judge rule in favor of the complainant. And then his grin brightens, happy tears filling his eyes for the next few moments.

In disgust, his attorney asks, "What is your soggy head thinking?"

"Would you like to see?" Mick responds.

Beneath the cuff of his suit coat is a medical alert bracelet, and the server riding on the bracelet instantly sends its logs to the astonished AI.

"You've got the same system as Vemeer," it exclaims.

"Examine my thoughts," Mick advises.

"Oh dear God!"

Mick nods, tapping his temple with two strong fingers. "If this case stands, a mind's thoughts can be treated the same as a public performance. And since I am the first to legally imagine the potential for this technology — "

"Dear Lord!"

"I certainly deserve a healthy cut of any future profits."

His attorney collapses into a shiny little heap of folded limbs.

After a long pause, it admits, "This is probably not the right attitude. Since I could conceivably earn a healthy fortune just by being your counsel. But I don't like to lose cases, for any reason."

"Nor do I," says Mick.

Then with a wink, he says, "Find some other grounds. Appeal and appeal, and then appeal again. Do you understand me? I don't want to give this crazy old coot one bloody cent."

Then Mick smiles and thinks, "Nothing original in that notion, is there?"

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"The past is a foreign country," wrote L. P. Hartley. "They do things differently there." And yet it seems the human heart functions the same in both 2005 and in the Silurian Age. Or so suggests Mr. Utley in his latest story.

How they do things in the future is open to discussion, but we expect that Mr. Utley's collection The Beasts of Love *will be available in mere months and a collection of time-travel stories entitled* Where or When *should be out around the end of this year.*

Promised Land

By Steven Utley

TIM'S COLOR HAD IMPROVED by the time Rene found him on the starboard catwalk under the helicopter deck. She gave him a solicitous smile and said, "Feel better now?"

"No. Just emptier."

"You're carrying on a great tradition. Charles Darwin was seasick most of the time he spent aboard the *Beagle*."

He looked sheepishly at the calm graptolite-choked sea; the surface glistened with sunlight reflected from the creatures' semitransparent and iridescent flotation bags. "I can't speak for Darwin, but I'm ashamed of myself. I feel like I've just defiled this place."

"You'll get your sea legs yet."

"It wasn't until this trip that I've ever been out of sight of land in my whole life."

"Well, perk up, we're almost there," and she directed his attention to a point off the starboard bow.

From that distance, the island looked like nothing so much as an

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immense heap of broken glass. Most of the Paleozoic real estate they had seen before now had tended toward dun, the grayish brown of barren, heavily weathered rock. This island was as black as tar, with here and there a gleam of sunlight on a ribbon of moving water. Rivulets rushed down from the interior; waterfalls cascaded directly into the sea or splashed onto scree at the bases of jagged cliffs. In places the cliffs dropped straight into the sea; elsewhere the waves had gouged out caves or carved away softer portions of the coast to create isolated irregular pillars. These sea stacks stoically endured endless battering while, behind them, the cliffs retreated across rocky, wave-cut platforms.

Tim made a face. "Not really a place you'd want to bring the family."

"Oh, I don't know. That's prime pre-Pangaean oceanfront property. Grand view of Panthalassa. Put in a concession stand, some rides, a water park — people would come from eons around."

"Think Dick'll like it?"

Now more than ever before, she thought, Dick is incapable of liking anything. But she said, "He'd goddamn well better like it, after what we've done to get him here. And he's going to have it all to himself once we've come and gone. A whole prehistoric island to call his own."

"Where do you suppose it'll end up — plate-tectonically speaking?"

She shrugged. "Part of Scotland, maybe Ireland."

"Scotland and Ireland are good."

She glanced at her watch and turned from the rail. "They should be just about ready for us in the boat bay. You sure you've got everything?"

"Everything. Everything except breakfast, lunch, and dinner, that is. And my socks. Those came up right after dinner did. I wish we could fly over in a 'copter."

"Take it up with the Navy. Besides, I thought you said you suffer from airsickness, too."

"Airsickness, seasickness, carsickness. I can be utterly miserable on land and sea and in the air."

"You're certainly versatile."

"It's the hike once we get ashore that I'm not looking forward to."

They went below decks and waited until the bluejackets had finished stowing equipment and supplies into the boat. Then they stepped aboard and took their places under a canvas awning, and their Navy pilot deftly

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maneuvered the craft out into the open and made for shore. He put in to a cove where the sea had first created a small inlet and then, breaking through relatively soft rock, enlarged it. A second bluejacket had stationed himself in the bow as lookout. From time to time he raised his left or right hand, and the pilot gave the wheel a twist. The water here was smooth and clear, and on the bottom lay large, dark, irregular masses capable of holing the boat's hull. Two other Navy men, including an older one who was in charge, sat amidships. No one spoke. The only sound was the thrum of the boat's motor.

Within the cove, rubble from the crumbling cliffs encircled a muddy fringe of beach. One section of cliff had collapsed entirely. The landing party, comprising the two civilians and three of the Navy men, had to climb the steeply graded scree burdened with all their gear before they could at last consider themselves safely ashore. When they were about halfway up, Rene overheard one young sailor remark that "that skinny old lady climbs like a goat," and called a halt for rest. While the sailors caught their breath and looked on with varying degrees of interest and bemusement, she and Tim poked among the rocks and exclaimed in delight as they fished out wriggling primitive arthropods and insubstantial green plants. Tim showed the Navy men his muddy fingers.

"Ah?" said the one in charge.

"Dirt," said Tim. "Soil."

"Ah," said the Navy man. "That's good." He sounded tentative, almost dubious.

"Next time," said another, younger Navy man, "I hope you folks'll pick someplace closer to home and not so high out of the water."

The Navy man in charge nodded agreement. "What's so special about *this* island?"

"It's on the dark side of the world." Tim nodded toward the horizon. "All your major landmasses are thataway. From there all the way around to back of there is one big stretch of ocean with just the occasional crescent of volcanic islands wherever there's a subduction zone close by. And these isolated islands are the forcing houses for evolution. We can expect to find some very strange species here."

"Oh, thrill," said the young bluejacket. "Like there aren't enough strange species back at Stinktown. But why *this* island?"

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"It was named for a colleague of ours. So, when we started planning this little field trip — well, we wanted a remote island, so we said, 'Why not *this* one?' It fit our needs. Isolated, yet not literally on the back side of the world."

"Well," the young sailor drawled, "if I was your colleague, I'd be more particular about what I gave my name to."

"He's dead. We submitted his name to the nomenclature committee. They applied it to this island."

"Sorry," the sailor said.

"He died a long time ago," Rene said, "or a long time from now, however you want to put it."

A NURSE CARRYING A TRAY emerged from the room as Rene approached. They exchanged smiles, and Rene asked, "How is he? May I see him?"

"Go right in. His wife's with him. But he's not being polite to anybody today. You'll have to stand in front of the television to get him to pay you any attention. He's into one of his science things."

Rene ventured an experiment. "Do you know what it is, this science thing?"

The nurse lifted her shoulders in a meaty shrug. "I'm afraid I couldn't tell you if my life depended on it. Science isn't something they teach in nursing school."

"No. Of course not."

The nurse backed against the door and pushed it ajar, and through the tinny sound of television voices came a testy query, "What is it *now*?"

"You have another visitor."

"Kindly tell whoever it is to go away. Kindly tell him to go get stuffed."

"It's another lady."

"Then kindly tell *her* to go get stuffed. No, wait a second. Is she this dumpy bad-smelling thing with stringy mousy hair, wearing a too-small T-shirt and too-tight jeans?"

"It's a tall brunette, the same one as ever."

"Send Doctor de Souza right in. I'll tell her personally to go get stuffed."

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The nurse winked broadly at Rene and moved out of the doorway. Rene composed herself, then peeked around the doorframe. Dick lay amid a thicket of intravenous tubes and connections to monitoring devices; his wife, Judy, sat on the far side of the bed, holding his hand. The light coming through the opened blinds was cruel. Dick looked even more faded and shrunken than he had on the occasion of her preceding visit, a mere four days earlier. Judy looked puffy and tired, as though she had slept badly. Probably she had, Rene decided as she rapped on the doorframe and said, "Are you decent?"

"Sure, like I am *ever* decent. Come on in. You two have met, haven't you?"

"I hope I'm not intruding," Rene said as she stepped into the room. Judy appeared not to know what to say, to fumble for words, for a moment that lasted just long enough to make Rene acutely uncomfortable. Judy was somewhat of an unknown quantity to Dick's colleagues; he had always kept his professional and domestic lives well apart from each other, with the result that Rene could not now be certain that she and Judy had said two dozen words to each other in as many years. She could not even recall when she had last seen Judy — the last time Dick had been in the hospital, or the time before, or the time before that?

Finally, Judy said, "Dick's been talking back to the TV, but I've lost track of the argument," and fixed a smile on the lower half of her face. It only accentuated the sag of her jowls and the smudginess of the flesh beneath her pale eyes.

Rene moved a chair close to the bed. She had always towered over Dick, but now, even seated, she thought he looked dwarfish. "Good thing you came now," he said. "Later this afternoon I'm scheduled to have my brain transplanted into the body of the Frankenstein monster."

"*That* would be a monster." Rene looked across him at Judy and said, "Don't ask me why, it's nothing I can really put my finger on, but I strongly suspect he's been giving the staff a hard time."

Judy worked on her smile. "The person at the desk got that look on her face when I asked how he was today."

"I know That Look. With two capital letters."

Between them, Dick growled. "What do you expect? It's not like I *want* to be here. You know, for what it's cost for me to be here these past

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few days, we could finance a major expedition into the Paleozoic. Maybe two."

"Ah," said Rene. "You've heard the news."

He gestured at the television screen, at a man who stood behind a podium and addressed himself to the camera. "Got it straight from the man of the hour."

"—Roman poet Seneca," the man of the hour was saying, "wrote that the fates lead the willing and drag the unwilling. He could have been writing about paradigm shifts."

"To hell with Seneca, then," Dick said, "quote from Thomas goddamn Kuhn. Showoff. Overeducated schmuck. God, I hate physicists!"

"Dick," Judy said, "you shouldn't let yourself get worked up."

"Hatred gives me strength, honey."

"Paradigm shifts," the man of the hour went on, "are by definition unsettling. In fact, they can be downright scary. Back around the turn of the century, when I was an undergraduate, the news media announced that someone had got a pulse of light to exceed the cosmic speed limit. Actually, they had done no such thing and hadn't claimed to do any such thing. It was science reporters in the mainstream media who'd misunderstood and misrepresented the facts. All the same, for just a moment or two, before reason kicked in, I felt the world tilt ninety degrees out of plumb. Everything I believed was wrong! I experienced exactly the same kind of unease, almost a frisson of terror — and I know I speak for my fellow researchers, too — that moment of vertigo when we actually realized what we had, what we'd stumbled onto — "

"Hear that?" Dick said. "'*Stumbled* onto.' He credits serendipity! It was all luck! He's trying to sound modest."

"Modesty is a becoming trait," Judy said, "even in a scientist."

"Especially in a scientist," Rene said.

"Hah. Any second now I expect to see him dig his toe in the dirt and say, 'Aw shucks.' But you can tell he *knows* he's next year's Nobel winner. And in the meantime he'll be beating female grad students off with a stick. Or maybe male ones. Fruity bunch, physicists. It's all Professor Schmucko there can do to keep from exploding with satisfaction."

"I can't say I blame him," Rene said. "He's entitled. It's his time machine."

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"It isn't a time machine. It's a wormhole."

"Whatever it is, Dick, it's too wonderful a thing for such a slimy-sounding name."

"You're in the wrong line of work if slime upsets you."

"Oh, you know what I mean. They should call it a time warp, a space warp. Something — *grand*. Something science-fictiony."

"My distinct impression's that they're trying to make it sound as un-science-fictiony as they can. Anyway, what's in a name?"

"At least they should stop referring to its mouth. A mouth implies the existence of a nether aperture. Hardly an image to encourage explorers."

"Hah. It won't discourage a single one. I bet the line at the Directorate of Geosciences already stretches clear around the block. You should be in it instead of here."

"I'm there in spirit. Someone else is there in person. Don't think for one second we're going to miss out on this."

"Some of us are."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence in the room. Finally, Rene asked, "How are you today?"

He grimaced, then worked the grimace into a tight smile. "I'm how I was a mere four days ago, only more so. I'm awful, thank you. Just bloody awful. I think this time is it."

Rene looked at Judy, who would not meet her eyes. She could read nothing in the woman's expression, no clue as to how to proceed. Rene weighed possible responses. Nonsense, you'll be out of here before you know it. Or: You mustn't give up hope. Or: I wish you wouldn't talk that way. But she had said those things to him on previous occasions and knew that he expected better from her now. She said, "You know, you don't *always* have to be the pessimist of the team."

"You angling for the position? Feh. Amateur. Rene'll deny this, honey, but deep down in her heart of hearts she always thinks the glass is half full. Me, I know it's half empty. And dirty. And I'm the one who's going to have to wash it."

Judy said, "Dear, you don't have to do your whole comedy routine for us."

"Speaking of comedy routines," he asked Rene, "how did the conference go?"

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Rene, grateful for the change of subject, said, "It went — it started out okay, but then the news broke — " she nodded in the direction of the television screen " — and after that it just became impossible to get anyone to stick to the program. It devolved from a conference to a bacchanal."

"And probably stopped just short of a panty raid. In other words, nothing out of the ordinary. Paleo boys loose in the halls. Booze flowing like wine. Poolside furniture tossed into the deep end. Someone making a pass at Tetyana Pylpiv. Tetyana passing out from the shock."

"Basically. On the other hand — do you remember Caroline Warren?"

"Paleobotanist from Cornell." For an instant, his eye sparkled mischievously. He turned his head toward his wife. "Redhead. Woof."

"See?" Judy said quietly. "Plenty of life left in you yet, old dog."

"As soon as the news broke," Rene went on, "and the implications started to sink in, Caroline Warren jumps up and says, 'Screw this conference,' and goes and shuts herself up in her hotel room. The next morning — "

"As the usual idiots are dragging around and comparing hangovers!"

" — she comes in with an entire study plan for determining the precise relationships of all those plants that're always lumped together as Cooksonia. 'Just give me one week in Paleozoic time,' she says. And of course she was all hot and bothered about some of the other specimens the probe brought back, the ones like nothing we've ever seen before."

"I would join in the celebratory jig," Dick said, "but under the circumstances...."

"Everyone sent regards and hopes you get well very soon."

"Ugh. Tell everyone for me, 'Up yours very much.'" He grimaced again; this time, he let it remain a grimace. "I distinctly recall telling the head nurse to block all incoming regards and hopes. No flowers, no get-well cards. All visitors to be stripped and cavity-searched. All optimism, however guarded, to be confiscated on the spot."

"Don't we even get points for meaning well?"

"I hate to disappoint everyone. But like I said, I think this is it. The disease's led a merry chase all through me these last couple years. Bladder, lungs. Now it's holed up inside my head where you couldn't get at it with any instrument more delicate than an axe."

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He glared suddenly at the television screen, which had bifurcated to show the man of the hour on the left, listening as an audience member on the right asked a question.

"That's enough of that crap," Dick said, "now let me show you something really cool," and when he spoke to the television screen an underwater scene instantly appeared. Shafts of sunlight slanted downward through green murk to illuminate patches of bottom mud. A shadowy form came swimming along just above the bottom, came head-on, purposefully, straight toward the viewer. Seemingly at the last moment, it turned sharply aside, affording Rene a glimpse of many pairs of bristly jointed appendages clustered on the underside of the blunt head. A long, flattened appendage extended oar-like from each flank. Halfway along its length, the segmented body narrowed, terminating in an affair like a dirty ice pick.

"Eurypterid," she breathed.

"*E. remipes* in the flesh," he said, "or its kissing cousin, anyway."

"That is just incredible."

"Lucky it wasn't one of the big eurypterids. Pterygotus would've tried to eat their roboprobe. Haven't you seen this already?"

"Not this particular clip."

"Want to see it again? Can you stand it?"

"Are you kidding?"

They watched the eurypterid a second time, and a third, in slow motion, and he told the television to freeze the image as the creature was halfway through its turn to the side, and to enlarge and enhance a particular section so that she could clearly see the underside of the head, the arrangement of the legs around the toothplate, the grisly orifice of the mouth. Then he let it swim on, and glowed with pleasure for a moment. Then his face clouded over again. "It moves," he said, "just like your computer models."

"Our computer models."

"Don't be generous. You did all the work. I began to die." He told the television screen to go away, and it instantly blanked itself. "At the risk of sounding really really bitter, this is as close as I'm ever going to get to going there, being there."

She took his free hand. It was cool in hers, the bones felt very fragile,

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and the blue veins showed prominently through the pale translucent skin. On the other side of the bed, Judy seemed intent on the hand she held.

"A week ago," Dick said, "I could've died happy and at peace with the world. I mean that. I'm tired and in pain all the time and I keep finding myself at the point of striking a bargain with some deity or other. 'Since you aren't going to cure me, God or gods, could you please just kill me a bit faster?' Don't either of you dare tell anybody I got religion on my death bed."

"I swear on a stack of Bibles," Rene said, "I wouldn't dream of it."

"Better not. I'll find some way to haunt anyone who tells lies about me. Anyway, at least till my brain turns to gleet, I've got to lie here and watch all this exciting stuff on television. Part of me's thrilled, of course. But the part of me that's dying, and it's the part of me that gets bigger all the time, crowding out the other parts of me, that part feels cheated, big time. That part's resentful as hell. That part of me feels like Tantalus in the old legend. In Hell he's hungry and thirsty and food and water are just out of reach. Whence, tantalize."

"I seem to recall Tantalus was being punished for his sins."

"That's what *really* pisses me off — it's a bum rap. If there's a God, I'm going to kick his ass for this. Here I'm coming up on the end of my life and after due reflection I'm deciding it's been a pretty good one. And then, suddenly, just out of reach, there's the thing that makes everything I've ever done pall. Time travel! Goddamn *time travel!* Brainboy on television's going to be one of the immortals of science, everybody'll get to jump through his wormhole, they'll make important discoveries and win fame and glory. And guess who has to stay right here at home and be worm's meat."

The women said, "*Dick*," in unison and then looked at each other in embarrassment.

"Oh, both of you, don't look so goddamn stricken. I'm the one who should look stricken. I *feel* stricken. There's a party in the Paleozoic, and I can't go. I'm not going anywhere from here. Well, to the hospice, for a while, then it's off to the morgue. I wasn't afraid of dying — *as* afraid of dying — before all this. I'd already made it clear that no heroic measures are to be taken — what a stupid phrase! Heroic measures! Mock-heroic is more like it. But now I'd be grabbing at straws if there were any straws to grab at. I don't care what, untested drugs, yak dung extract. Anything as

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long as it promises recovery. No, not even recovery. Just a little more time. A year, six good months, so I, too, could go jump into that wormhole and see this prehistoric wonderland for myself."

Judy had let go of her husband's hand. Now, as she reached for it again, Rene studied her expression and after a moment realized what it was: That Look, with two capital letters — embarrassment and exasperation commingled with, and held in check by, resignation.

She started as the big nurse filled the doorway behind her and said, "Sorry to interrupt — "

Dick glowered at her past Rene. "What do you want now? No, wait, just let me take a wild guess. It's time for more unpleasantness, isn't it? Fresh indignities against my person."

"Dick," said Judy, "*be* nice."

"Why change my ways at this late date?"

Rene made a smile on her face and said to the nurse, "Allow me to apologize for my colleague's rude behavior. It never used to be a problem when we kept him chained in the basement."

The nurse chuckled and advanced into the room, radiating a kind of genial purposefulness. "Perhaps his problem is he always was too healthy till now. Someone who's never sick a day in their life doesn't know how to behave when they do wind up in the hospital."

"He doesn't know how to behave anywhere."

The nurse chuckled again and said to Dick, "Now are you going to let her talk about you like that?"

"Rene, if you're going to talk about me like that, please be a love and do it behind my back."

"Well," said the nurse, "I'm afraid visiting hours are over."

"Sorry," Judy said, "I — we lost track of the time."

Rene stood. "I'll see you tomorrow, Dick, if I can get away."

He effected part of a shrug. "You only have to bother with me as long as I remain lucid. Tell everybody to be brave."

Judy said, "We all have to be brave, don't we?" and leaned over the bed to kiss his cheek, near the corner of his mouth.

Rene patted his hand in farewell. "Don't make life too hard for these nice nurses. Try not snapping at just whoever's handy."

Dick peered around the nurse's bulging flank as she insinuated herself

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between visitors and bed. "If I only yelled at people I'm really mad at — life's too short for that degree of discrimination."

"Be good. Till tomorrow."

Judy stood no taller than Dick; as the two women walked slowly toward the elevators, Rene could not help hunching her shoulders and stooping slightly in an effort to compensate for the disparity in their heights. Judy glanced up at her and said, "He always did describe you as his tallest, slimmest, and most limbful colleague." Rene started to laugh, but then Judy added, "I feel like such a dumpling, waddling along beside you. Well, thank you for coming to see him. I'm sure you must be very busy with that — that time-travel business or whatever it is."

"Whatever it is, it is pretty exciting, isn't it? If I don't get on the team that goes through this wormhole, it won't be for lack of trying."

"I'm sure it won't."

"But, meanwhile — if there's anything I can do to help, anything any of us can do — "

"Yes. There is something."

"Dick is just — there's nothing we wouldn't do for him."

"I'm sure. Everyone tells me how much they've always liked and admired him."

They arrived before the elevator doors, and Judy dug a handkerchief from her purse. Her eyelashes glistened wetly. As she daubed at her eyes, she said, "If you want to know the truth, sometimes I have a hard time remembering him when he *was* likeable and admirable. You see how he's becoming extremely difficult to be with. Well, he's ill. And he's full of anger and self-pity. Anyway. I started thinking about what I have to say before you came. When he was watching television. I've never been good at talking to people. Not around Dick, anyway. It was always easier to fade into the wallpaper. But now I'm having to step into the foreground and take charge of everything, and it leaves me wide open for his famous caustic wit. The less of a sense of humor he has, the more caustic what he does have becomes. I go home in tears after every visit. But I guess a sense of humor's a lot to expect from a dying man. Especially one with a brain tumor. Anyway. I'd be very grateful if, from now on, you would downplay work when you come to see him. Particularly if it involves this new discovery."

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"Well, I'm — "

The elevator doors slid open, and they stepped inside and rode down in silence with three other people.

In the lobby, Judy drew Rene to one side, out of the way of traffic, and said, "You saw how excited he is. It's not good for him. He needs rest and quiet from now on."

"Yes, of course, but — "

"He has a lifetime of valuable work to look back on. That ought to satisfy him. It ought to satisfy all of you. For all these years, I've had to share him with you. It was more like I had him on loan from you, when I did have him. When he was off in Australia or Antarctica, or even just off to a conference, I was at home with the children and my half of the bed. *We* were *only* his family — his real rapport was with his colleagues and with things that died millions of years ago. Well, now he doesn't have much time left. I want as much of that time as I can have. If I'm being horribly selfish, I'm sorry, I can't help it. But I am claiming my rights as his wife."

Judy turned abruptly and left. Numbly, dumbly, Rene stood and watched her go, then, after the better part of a minute, moved suddenly. She got out of the building as quickly as she could without breaking into a run. She was okay until she had come within arm's reach of her car. Then she felt as though all warmth had flowed from her, suddenly, in an instant, to disperse in some vast dark void. Her legs went rubbery. She staggered against the car, clutched desperately with both hands at its smooth surfaces. "Open the door," she said, and sounded thin and tremulant to herself, and when the car hesitated, she yelled, almost screamed, "Open the damn door!" and the door opened, and she got in.

The car said, "Please fasten your seatbelt."

She gripped the steering wheel and pressed her forehead against the backs of her hands. Her hands felt cold; her face felt hot.

"Please fasten your seatbelt."

She flung herself back in her seat, pummeled the steering wheel with her fists. She could not see for tears. Her fist collided with something less yielding than steering-wheel padding, and pain lanced her from knuckles to elbow. She clutched the throbbing hand to herself, curled around it.

"Please fasten —"

"I know. Shut up."

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She blindly fumbled with the seatbelt until she heard the click of the buckle. Then she wiped her eyes with her fingers and glared at the dashboard.

"*There*," she gasped. "*Happy*?"

THE BLUEJACKETS HELPED Rene and Tim pitch camp above the slope and tested the radio for them, and then she expressed her gratitude to the United States Navy and said, "See you in six weeks."

The Navy man in charge said, "Happy collecting," and led the detail back down the slope to the waiting boat.

Watching them pick their way through the rubble, Tim sighed and shook his head. "Six whole weeks without cute sailors."

"You've always got me, big boy."

"Sorry. For starters, you're way too tall for me."

"You men. But at least you didn't say I'm too old."

Tim turned and surveyed the rocky jumble of the island. "Not that we came for the scenery, of course, but the view's scarcely worth all the effort we put into coming up."

"You'll feel better after you've collected a scorpion sting or two. Well. Shall we go ahead and get it over with?"

"Please, let's." Tim produced a metal canister from his backpack and set it on the ground. "I can't tell you what a relief it'll be not to have a dead man on my hands. I'm temperamentally unsuited for grave robbing."

"We didn't rob a grave, Tim."

"I'm also temperamentally unsuited for smuggling. We *have* broken the rules."

"I appreciate your help."

"For chrissake, Rene. It's Dick. I wouldn't have done it for just anybody, you know."

"Me, either."

She unfolded the blade of an entrenching tool and began to dig a hole in the gritty earth. When she had finished, Tim handed her the metal canister. She gripped it firmly with both hands while he unscrewed and removed its cap. Then they knelt together over the hole, and he said, "Do you want to say something first?"

"I've been wondering all along what to say. All I've ever come up with

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is some lines from Housman. And an apology, I guess. 'Sorry it took us so long to get you here, Dick.' Ah, Tim. I never once told him I loved him. It just never occurred to me to say it in all those years we worked together. Then, at the end, I was made to feel I didn't have the right to say it. I didn't want to intrude."

"I'm sure he must have known. You two were best buds. Inseparables. There were *rumors*."

"That's all they ever were, just rumors."

"Of course. I never believed them for a second."

"To the best of my knowledge, he was absolutely faithful to his wife."

"Beats me how."

"Not nice, Tim."

"Well, maybe not, but even so."

"She was his wife." After a long moment, Rene added, "She just wasn't his first love. What a terrible thing, to be shut out like that. He felt cheated by fate, but she felt cheated by him."

She carefully upended the canister and poured its ashy contents into the hole. Then she recited:

I see the country, far away,
Where I shall never stand;
The heart goes where no footstep may
Into the promised land.

"Nice," said Tim, "in a singsong kind of way. Housman, eh?"

"I would've recited it at the memorial service, but she was there, in full possession of the event, so to speak. I didn't want to make her resent us — resent *me* even more than she already did."

Tim waited a moment before taking the canister from her and returning it to his backpack. He watched Rene refill the hole. When she had finished, he said, "Well, that's that, at long damn last."

"After he died, someone suggested talking to the widow about bringing his ashes through the time portal and burying them here. I said, 'You'll never wring that concession from her.'"

"I'm surprised her children went for the idea. I'd've thought she'd've turned them against us."

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"No, it was their wish. The whole time he was dying, they had to listen to him rant about not getting to come through the time portal. So they let Mom keep him on the mantelpiece. After she was gone, they brought him to me, and now I've brought him here."

"So she was happy, and now they're happy, too. Maybe she's still happy, now that she's got him for all eternity, if there is an eternity." Tim looked around in the failing light. "And I hope he's happy with his island."

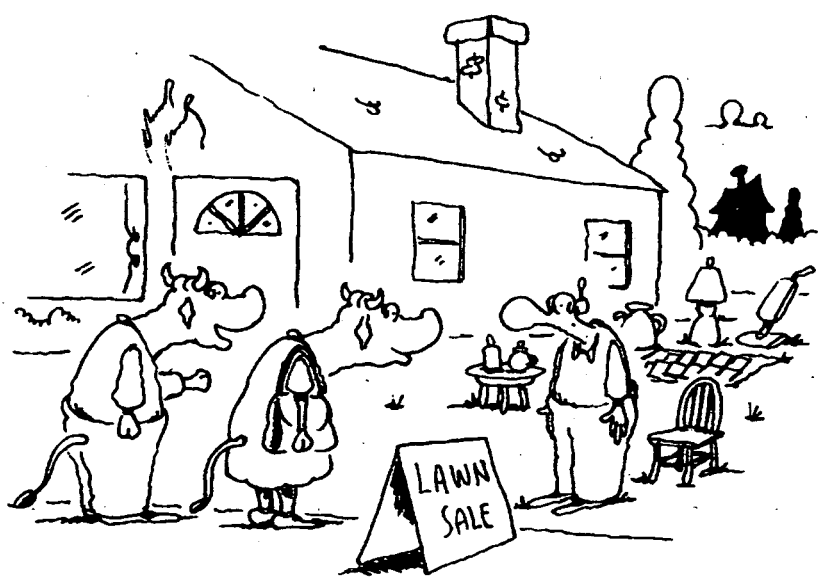
She smiled wanly. "He didn't have a mystical bone in his body, but if he is anywhere, I'm sure he thinks we've taken an awful chance and are being horribly sentimental. He's probably pretty disgusted."

"And you?"

"I think we're being horribly sentimental, too."

"No, I mean, are you happy now?"

Rene gently smoothed the earth with her hand. "Is anyone ever really happy?"



"Get the stuff off and we'll take the whole thing."

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

POST TRAUMATIC STRAITJACKET SYNDROME

AS I WALKED out of a screening of *The Jacket*, a young man inexplicably asked me "Did you like it?"

"Yes," I replied. And that was no lie. And yet, I would have been hard-pressed to pinpoint why. For even in that disorienting adjustment period during which I walked out of a darkened theater into the light of the afternoon, I recognized that what I had seen was not a particularly good movie.

Like most films today, the logic was cracked. And the thing seemed made out of spare parts from countless other movies. One part *La Jetée*, one part *Millennium*, one part *Somewhere in Time*, two parts *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Snakepit*, with smaller fractions of a dozen other films, and a soupçon of *Touched by an Angel*, *The Jacket* is an undeniable hodgepodge. But like a really well-made replicant, it can fool you into thinking it's the real McCoy.

Massy Tadjedin's screenplay is not the major selling point here — at least not as it has been fiddled and diddled and edited.

The story (originally by Tom Bleecker and Marc Rocco) involves a well-meaning G.I. during the first Gulf War. After a severe head wound, Jack Starks (Adrien Brody) is shuffled through VA hospitals and then bounced back to the snowy back roads of his native Vermont (here, played by Scotland). Jack is missing some of his memory, and is still a bit off his bean. But he remains, despite his travails, a young man of good intentions. He's the kind of fellow who would, without question, stop to help a substance-impaired woman (Kelly Lynch) and her young daughter, Jackie (Laura

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Marano), whose old truck is broken down on the side of a snowy road.

Later, he is picked up by a young man (Brad Renfro) who is on the lam. As his luck — all bad — would have it, Starks is wounded yet again when the young man kills a cop and then leaves the unconscious Jack to take the blame. Unfortunately for our hapless hero, the police seem not to know how to investigate a murder and public defenders seem not to know how to defend their clients up in the Northern Kingdom of 1992. The ever more mentally fragile Starks is found not guilty by reason of insanity, and sent to a mental hospital called Alpine Grove.

There, disillusioned, alcoholic Doctor Becker (played by a somnolent Kris Kristofferson) decides to experiment on him. His unusual mode of treatment consists of shooting his patients up with mind-altering drugs, binding them in straitjackets, and then locking them in a basement morgue drawer for hours at a time. During his ordeal, Starks begins to regain glimpses into his wartime experiences as well as his frame-up for murder. You might think that the plot would thereafter explore Starks's need to recover his memory so as to clear his name of the murder charge. But if you were expecting that turn of events, you'd be wrong. The crime story in the original setup is one of a half dozen subplots that are never fully explored and are certainly never resolved in *The Jacket*.

Instead, the plot veers in a completely different direction. It soon appears that Jack can not only see flashes of his past during his torture sessions, he can also jump forward some fifteen years into the future. In 2007, he meets a self-destructive young woman who brings him back to her place on Christmas Eve to crash. Jack soon realizes that the drunken, hard-bitten young woman (played by the lovely Keira Knightley) he has just met is none other than the cute little girl, Jackie, he had helped right before his frame-up.

Before long, Jack has (way, way too easily, I might add) convinced Jackie that he is that kindly figure from her childhood, fast-forwarded without aging. And the two fall in love and bed down together. (Ewwww!) Just to complicate matters further, Jack realizes that he is destined to die of a blunt head trauma in a very few days. (What is it with this guy and head injuries?)

I think I'm supposed to say, here, that the two lovers race against the clock to change Starks's deadly

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fate: But, you know, they really don't.

What Jack hopes to accomplish during his time-travel (besides hanging out with a beautiful babe) is a real mystery. As is much of the rest of this story. The time loops with Starks interacting with present and future versions of his doctors, Becker and the more humane if enigmatic Dr. Lorenson (Jennifer Jason Leigh), will leave you dizzy after a while. Who said what to whom when becomes harder and harder to keep track of with every scene.

As indicated earlier, very few plotlines get tidied away in this movie. At least, not so your average audience member could understand. The movie mystery? Nah. The love story? Nope. And there are subplots that aren't even set up well enough to be explained or resolved. A cruel orderly who helps with the treatment/torture sessions in the early nineties seems to be a patient at the hospital in 2007. I never had a clue what *that* was about!

The Jacket is definitely one of those jumbles of a movie that I would normally rail against. And yet, in this case, the film still somehow manages to hang together as whole.

In trying to figure out why, all I can offer is the prodigious application of talent and atmosphere. The acting is quite good in *The Jacket* — notably that of Mr. Brody, since the film stands or falls based on his ability to sell the time-traveling hero. There is a naturalness and ease to Adrien Brody's performance — even when he's thrashing about and screaming — that makes the preposterous loose ends seem plausible. And that underfed, big-eyed puppydog thing he has going on fits the part, too. (Although, with that impressive beak of his, big-eyed parrot might be a more apt comparison.)

Peter Deming's photography is always evocative. And director John Maybury brings an artist's sensibility to what would have otherwise been a piece of dreck.

Maybury is known in the cinematic community for his compelling and unpleasant film biography of British painter Francis Bacon, *Love Is the Devil* (1998). The sometime painter and one-time editor and set/costume/production designer has also made a name for himself in the field of short, experimental films. He has even worked extensively in music and environmental video. So, although he is less than a household name in Hollywood, the man knows how to

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create an eloquent look and feel for his filmic work. And that talent has never been more needed than in this strange mélange of a movie.

In the end, I can't exactly recommend *The Jacket*. Nevertheless, I wouldn't want to actually dissuade you from watching it either. It is one of those rare films that somehow, against all odds, ends up being more than the sum of its varied and very disjointed parts.

DVD Extra: Wonderfalls

I've never understood why anyone would bother buying a complete season of, say, *Everybody Loves Raymond* on DVD. The show has been repeated to death on CBS and is now in round-the-clock syndication in just about every city in the world. The "First Complete Season" of *Carnivale*, that I can see. Not everyone gets HBO — more's the pity. So lots of television fans (who have been hearing very intriguing things from friends about the show) now have, with the video release, a chance to see if *Carnivale* is really as strange and intense as they have heard.

But my favorite kind of DVD collection is one that brings completely lost (and not just obscure) treasures to light. *Wonderfalls: The Complete Viewer Collection* is just such a set.

If you have never heard of *Wonderfalls*, I will not be surprised. Co-created by Todd Holland *(Malcolm in the Middle, The Larry Sanders Show)* and Bryan Fuller *(Dead Like Me, Star Trek: Voyager)* for Fox, the quirky comedy-drama never had full network support. (Guess the suits were too interested in making and promoting cheap and loathsome "reality" entries like *The Swan* and *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé.)* Pushed back from fall to midseason, and then dumped to Fridays at 9 p.m., *Wonderfalls* was set up to fail. And did. Fox aired only four episodes of the series and then unceremoniously yanked it forever.

Critics and fans who had already fallen for the show were outraged. Campaigns were launched to save the show or get it picked up by another network, and when that went nowhere fast, fans simply prayed for a chance to see the last nine unaired episodes. And finally, here they are on DVD.

The DVDs are a delight — as well as a total downer. Seeing those final episodes makes you realize how good the show really was, and how much better it might have

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become, if allowed to grow and develop, along with its characters. Central among these is an Ivy-League educated, self-involved twenty-four-year-old slacker named Jaye Tyler (the charming Caroline Dhavernas), who wears her well-rehearsed disdain for social involvement and personal achievement like a badge of honor. She also wears a yellow vest with a name patch on the front of it, as she (just barely) works as a flippant store clerk at a local Niagara Falls souvenir shop.

Jaye tries very hard to avoid her family of overachievers, along with everyone else, until two things occur: She meets a bartender (Tyron Leitso) on the rebound from a very bad honeymoon experience; and numerous logos, emblems, toys and tchotchkes — all in the form of animals — start giving her cryptic yet emphatic directives.

Wonderfalls has been compared to *Joan of Arcadia*. Both shows, created concurrently, obviously draw on the Joan of Arc story. And both were created in the wake of 9/11. But while there is no doubt that CBS's young Joan is truly talking to her creator, in various human forms, Jaye's situation is much different. Her animal muses are much more ambiguous. It is never quite clear whether they represent God, Satan, some other powerful entities, or are simply hallucinatory manifestations of Jaye's warped mind.

And while *Joan of Arcadia*, with her wholesome life and family, wanders into goody-two-shoes territory more often than not, *Wonderfalls* has a much more skewed and gently sardonic view of life. Dear cranky Jaye is far from heroic, and would love to stay that way, if only wax lions and monkey bookends would stop bossing her around. And while *Joan of Arcadia*'s plots are generally quite predictable, you are never quite sure where a *Wonderfalls* storyline will take you, or exactly what Jaye's muses are trying to accomplish.

Do yourself a favor. Buy, or at the very least rent, the *Wonderfalls* series. If you like romance, the approach-avoidance dance of Jaye and her bartender will keep you hooked. And if love entanglements are too precious for you, there is plenty of very funny, clever writing to keep even the most curmudgeonly viewer quite entertained.

Watching these wonderful *Wonderfalls* episodes that never aired, it's hard not to feel despair for network television today. TV lore is full of stories about shows like *Seinfeld*, *Hill Street Blues*, or the kindred *Northern Exposure* that struggled

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to find an audience in their early days. Their networks stuck with the shows, and they eventually found their rhythm and their viewer base. If any of those shows debuted today, they'd be gone in a month.

Don't get me wrong, it's great to have the bittersweet consolation prize of this DVD set of *Wonderfalls*. But having the show live long and prosper would have been better still.

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Mike Shultz's fiction has appeared in The Leading Edge *and is forthcoming in* Black Gate. *His first story for us is sure to be a hit with everyone who bought one of those Librarian Action Figures with amazing push-button shushing action. (And by the way, if you check out LibrarianActionFigure.com, you'll see this great quotation from Nancy Pearl, the woman who modeled for the figure: "The role of a librarian is to make sense of the world of information. If that's not a qualification for superhero-dom, what is!")*

Old as Books

By Mike Shultz

I WAS NINETY-FIVE YEARS old the day Pavo severed me from the Library. As the oldest codexer alive, and the third oldest ever, I'd believed no one would dare, out of respect at least. But he was Nexus of the Library. The decision to sever me from my life's work, my passion, from everyone I cared about, was his to make.

Pavo is my son.

The day it happened began with our morning meeting, in which he humiliated me in front of everyone.

"I'll tell you what he did," I told Circinus, a fellow codexer, as we stood in the stacks. (He'd missed the meeting.) "Pavo said I miscataloged a tome, and that I've made other mistakes, too."

"Sagitta!" he said, glancing around to make sure no one heard. "He's the Nexus! I know he's your son, but...."

"The Nexus shouldn't be questioned?" I snorted. "When I was Nexus, and I acted like an ass, I appreciated when someone pointed it out."

"Oh, yes. You were the softest-tongued Nexus the Library has ever

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known," Circinus said. "Like the time you yelled at a young codexer who'd accidentally dropped a tome."

"I remember the one. *Somnetic Properties of Aquatic Herbs.*" I closed my eyes and rested my hand on the row of books beside me. "It's in Musca's domain, on the fifth axis. Still has a dent on the corner from when you dropped it."

"You can still feel the stacks like that?" He shook his head. "Amazing. That's not even your domain."

"It used to be," I said, feeling my irritation rise. "Before Pavo took that section away from me."

"Less work for you," Circinus said, turning to face the stacks. He tapped in a few jutters, putting their spines back in alignment with the rest of the row. As he moved to another section, I spotted one he missed — it was only jutting by a few hairspans — and surreptitiously fixed it.

"And maybe it's for the best," he added softly.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

After a pause, he said, "Did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Miscatalog the tome."

"Of course not! Never in my whole life!"

Circinus grimaced and held up a placating hand. "Look, Sagitta. I'm twenty years younger than you, and I forget things sometimes. No one blames you. But you know how much pressure the sorcerers put on the Nexus. They want the Library maintained perfectly. Pavo does whatever keeps them happy."

"You agree with him. You think I'm not up to the job anymore."

"I didn't say that. You make it sound worse than it is. But you have to admit that — "

"Didn't I just prove to you a moment ago how well I can still do my job?" I was furious, nearly enough to throw books on the floor.

"I don't know," Circinus said. "But Pavo's the Nexus, and it's up to him to decide if you — if you can still — "

"I think I've had enough of this," I said, then turned and walked away.

"Oh, come on, don't be like this."

I didn't stop. I wanted to walk faster, but the old pain in my ankle didn't let me. I clenched my fists, yellowed nails biting into my leathery palms.

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"Sagitta, I didn't mean it like that," he called after me. I was glad he didn't follow me.

If only a shaft had been nearby. I would've gotten on the aster disk and glided up out of earshot in an eyeblink. Then again, riding aster disks made me dizzy lately. I had to keep back from the edge like a frightened child. As it was, I hobbled away as fast as my decrepit old legs would carry me.

When I couldn't hear him anymore, I slumped against a support column. Ten years ago, I would've continued the slump until my hind end hit the floor. But I knew better, now. It'd be a long time getting up if I did that.

I was old and falling apart.

But that was my body, not my mind. Pavo's accusation was false. His motivation was jealously.

He couldn't stand the idea of his father still walking the stacks, a father who knew them as well as he did. He claimed he was faster. Fah. I served my time and stepped down when a qualified replacement was ready. Not because I was losing my touch. That's the way it has been done for centuries.

I knew every tome in the Library the day I retired as Nexus. That's how the title is earned, and that's how I left it. Four million, three hundred thirty-three thousand, nine hundred and two tomes, last one acquired three days ago — *Techniques of Hyperkinetic Agitation*, a training manual for students of the conflagra branch of sorcery.

I took a deep breath through my nostrils, soaking in the smells. Lizardskin bindings. Ancient wood. A trace of cleaning oil. All wonderful. Gazing up into the heights, I allowed my consciousness to meld with the stacks. Twenty-three levels at this particular spot, I knew, though I couldn't see the roof in the dim glow of the sorcer-lights. Sometimes I imagined that the warm rows of tomes went on forever in all directions, that I could spend the rest of my days strolling the high halls with my fingertips brushing the curved bindings, hearing and feeling the rap-rap-rap of my rough skin against the scales, the sorcerer's runes on their backs flashing like lightning into my head....

Echoing laughter drifted to my ears. I sighed and let my hand fall from the books. I didn't remember putting it there.

I was about to slink off and get back to work when I realized who was

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coming. A group of children, prospective codexers on a tour of the Library. I was ten years old when my parents brought me for the testing. Only a third of the prospects make it, and they've already been through three years of training and culling. At first my teachers weren't so sure about me, but I'd known I would be accepted from the moment I saw the stacks.

I watched their approach, happy to see Codexer Mira leading them. My wife, Jahaia, passed away twenty years ago; her patience and sense of humor are irreplaceable. But something about Mira reminded me — with vague feelings of disloyalty — of Jahaia. Maybe it was Mira's sharp wit or her strength of spirit. Mira was twenty-five years younger than I, though, and probably would've been appalled to know my feelings, so I kept them hidden.

The children were a diverse group — a boy in a rich red coat, shoving, grabbing and shouting; a girl in tattered clothes looking at Mira with a smile that outshone the sorcerer's lights; a boy with long, braided hair, dragging his feet, speaking to no one; a girl with curly tresses at the rear trailing her fingers along the books...a dozen in all.

"Good morning to you, Codexer Sagitta," Mira said, bringing them to a stop. "Children, do you see Codexer Sagitta's hands? What do you notice about them?"

"They're wrinkled as a prune," the boy in the red coat said. "He looks old as books."

Fearless and rude. But with some guidance, he'd make a good codexer, perhaps as a representative to the sorcerers.

A number of the children giggled at his wisecrack.

"Oh, yeah," I said, holding up my hands. "See them big hairs? One time 'dexer Mira here thought there were spiders on them and swatted me with a cleaning rag."

They laughed.

"Well, don't just stand there giggling," I said. "Answer her question."

Eventually the girl at the back who'd been trailing her hands on the books slowly raised her hand. From her finger-trailing and the awed look in her eyes, I sensed that she had great potential.

"Yes, young lady?" Mira said.

"He's not wearing any rings."

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"Very good!" Mira said. "They're the latest fashion in the Out, I hear. Why do you suppose codexers don't wear them?"

Silence. I looked at the girl who'd answered. Her dark curls hid her face as she turned back to stare at the books.

"Well, if no one knows," Mira said, "I'm not going to — "

"She knows." I indicated the girl with a tilt of my head.

"Young lady? Excuse me, young lady?"

The other children snickered to one another, but the girl didn't seem to hear them.

The boy in the red coat stepped forward. "I know. Because the rings would scratch the books."

"A good answer, and something we mustn't ever do," I said. "But not correct."

He made an irritated face and looked down.

"And we're not telling you until somebody figures it out," Mira added.

I nodded, approving wholeheartedly. She was the best codexer with the children, and she knew how to teach them.

A few more gave guesses, all of them wrong. My attention, however, was on the girl at the back. I was burning with curiosity. She was obviously connecting to the Library, but to what extent? I wanted to talk to her alone.

"Well, children, enjoy the rest of the tour," I said, giving Mira a pointed look. She interpreted me well, glancing at the girl and nodding.

"Time to move along, children," she said, heading off down the aisle. "Remember what I said we would do if you behaved?"

"The aster disk!" they shouted, following eagerly after her.

Dark-curls didn't follow at first. When she did, she walked with her fingers grazing the spines of the books. I stopped her after a few steps.

"What's your name?" I said.

She tore her eyes away from the stacks.

"Cael."

"Did you hear Codexer Mira's question, Cael?"

She nodded, her curls bobbing. The movement reminded me of my own daughter, dead these many years. She'd been a fisher, an occupation I could scarcely imagine. The Out was a harsh place.

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"Well?"

"You can't feel the books as good with rings," she said. "That's why I took mine off."

"I noticed. Do you want to see something neat?"

"This is already wonderful," she said, looking up and around.

My lip trembled. I had to close my eyes for a moment before I could continue. The future of the Library stood before me. Who was I to teach her? I whispered a prayer to the Author of Life, asking for humility.

"Follow me," I said when I recovered. I was enjoying myself so much that I hardly noticed the pain in my ankle and the dull ache in my back as I stood and strolled along the stacks, fingers trailing low. Soon, I felt the heartbeat of her soft fingers against the curved spines thrumming through the books. I would've known she was trailing if I was deaf and blind.

She said nothing as we made our way down the long corridor and turned away from the rest of the children. I led her up a spiral that put me out of breath, and down a vertical shaft on an aster disk, almost not noticing how dizzy it made me. As we glided down, I demonstrated to her the rhythm of swiping the books as we dropped past each shelf. In my eagerness to show her more, I stepped off of the disk at the bottom a moment too soon. My ankle twisted, waking old agonies, but I did my best to ignore it, leading her through a winding hall that branched a dozen times, and finally to the wide avenue of the third axis.

"Let's stop here," I said, trying to keep the pain from my face. Each step was excruciating.

"That was amazing," she said, her eyes slightly glazed.

"Answer quickly," I replied. "How many books did you touch?"

"Five thousand two hundred and twelve."

She immediately seemed startled that the answer had popped out of her mouth.

Her count was correct. Mine was four higher, but we started and finished at slightly different places.

"You must've been concentrating really hard to count correctly all that way. I think I'm going to see you here again."

"Do you really think so?" The look on her face nearly broke my heart.

"I do. But now it's time for you to go back to your group."

"What are you going to do?"

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"Crawl into a corner and hide so no one can see my ugly old hands," I blurted. My ankle was on fire. The boy was right — I was old and worn out.

"My grandmother got mad at me for saying something like that once. Like that boy said to you. She put peach jam on my bread instead of apple, and I told her she was getting too old to tell me from my sister."

"What did she say to that?"

"Nothing. She smeared a blob of scallion paste over the peach jam and handed it to me. She knows I hate scallions."

"And so you realized her memory wasn't so bad after all. I think I'd like your grandmother."

"She died. That's why my village sent me here, so no one would have to take care of me. How do I get back?"

I'd heard of such things, but it saddened me that Cael knew it.

"With these," I said, twiddling my fingers and reaching to the nearest shelf. "The other children have been touching the books, and there's a fresh trail of divots and jutters to follow."

She headed off, fingers trailing. I kept track of her progress through the books until she made it back to Mira.

With her happy presence gone, my anger at Pavo rushed in to fill the void. Cael's grandmother had given me an idea. I grabbed a return that needed to be shelved and limped along the stacks, searching. My ankle throbbed, but I was too upset to care.

I soon found its place. I brushed my fingers along the spine of the book in my hands. *Transmorphic Stoneworking: Slate and Shale.* I slipped it in upside-down. The background buzz of its discontinuity with the rest of the Library would send my fellow codexers into a tizzy for the next few hours, trying to find it. Too long like that and its magic would change in ways that the sorcerers refused to explain — but vehemently warned us against. Pavo would feel the discontinuity the worst, like a bug crawling in his ear. But odds were good that he was in a meeting with a sorcerer and wouldn't be able to attend to it immediately. In any case, he'd have to deal with it eventually.

But would he know that it had been deliberate, as Cael had when her grandmother gave her scallion paste?

I chuckled. Either way, he wouldn't be happy.

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* * *

He found me humming to myself as I brushed stray dust motes from a row of tomes on telekinesis in my domain. I wanted him to see me doing something active; the trick would be not wincing if I took a step that my ankle didn't approve of.

"What do you think you're doing?" he said.

"Dusting."

"I don't mean right now, codexer. I mean when you put *Transmorphic Stoneworking* in upside-down."

So, he knew it was deliberate. That was something. I turned to face him.

"Codexer, is it?"

"Or maybe you're truly no longer qualified to be a codexer, and you just want me to think it was an accident."

He was baiting me. But I could play, too.

"Codexer, is it?" I repeated.

"Stop saying that. This isn't funny."

"Codexer, is it?"

Pavo's chin started doing its circular dance, like he was gnawing on a bit of tough meat. Didn't he know that I knew all of his quirks? I had him riled, and I was glad.

"Yes, you are a codexer, and I'm the Nexus," he said. "That means it's my responsibility to make sure every book is in its place. And you messed up. Again."

"You're practically yelling, Pavo. Trying to gather a crowd?"

He leveled a finger at me. "You're losing another row. Continue with the insubordination and it will be two."

My own son was pointing at me and making threats. Suddenly it wasn't fun anymore.

"What would your mother think if she saw you now?" I took a step forward as I spoke. Mistake. Pain shot up my leg. I hoped it hadn't shown on my face.

"Don't bring her into this," he said.

A pair of codexers appeared at the end of the aisle and gawked. We ignored them.

"Why did you tell everyone I miscataloged a book?"

"What are you talking about? I haven't told anyone yet."

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"No, not *Transmorphic Stoneworking*. Remember your accusation at the meeting this morning? When you humiliated me in front of everyone?"

More onlookers had gathered; I saw Circinus among them.

"Nexus, you summoned us?" Circinus said, approaching at the front of the growing crowd.

"Yes. I want everyone here for this."

"Everyone here for what?" I asked.

Pavo paced back and forth across the aisle, his wide blue Nexus robe swaying.

"I'm not waiting," I said. "Out with it."

"I can't protect you anymore, Father."

I knew my fate immediately. He meant to sever me from the Library. I'd be cast into the Out to live in a dirty old house, get rain on my head, sunburn, bug bites. Walk through dung-strewn streets. The thought of it disgusted me. But never seeing the Library again was far worse. I knew what happened to men my age who were severed. No purpose in life. No meaning. Empty time, aching bones. My mind would waste away without the books to keep me sharp. Soon, I'd forget my great-grandchildren's names and my body would fall to dust.

And they'd all look at me and think, what a poor old man. Old as books. My children would hold my arm on my way to the privy. They'd speak loud and slow, and ask me if I'd eaten enough. Cut my meat and wipe drool from my chin.

I didn't want to be pitied.

"Don't you think you're being a bit hard on him, Nexus?" someone said from beside me.

Mira. I hadn't heard her approach. Blessed, fearless Mira.

"No," Pavo said. "In fact — "

That's when I did it. It was all over anyway.

I grabbed a handful of books from the shelf and shoved them onto the floor. The assembled crowd gaped. Pavo's eyes filled with rage.

"How dare you — "

But I wasn't finished. I put my arm in the breach I'd created and swept a long swath of books onto the floor. None of us had ever seen books lying in a jumbled pile, and for a moment we all stared.

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"Codexer Sagitta," Pavo said, "I hereby sever you from all of your domain, for all time."

"That's not fair," Mira said. "You drove him to it."

I was devastated when no one else spoke in my defense. I couldn't look at them, afraid I'd see either pity or scorn.

Instead, I reached my hand to the books on the shelf below the one I'd emptied and closed my eyes. My consciousness melded with the Library.

"The book you accused me of miscataloging this morning was *Classification of Quasi-Spiritual Entities*. It belongs in Talera's domain, third axis, red hall, first level, three hundred seventh book from the end."

"Incredible," someone said. "That's my domain, but he's exactly right."

"Last taken out by Sorcerer Kymiros Telfanor last year on the fifteenth day of New Harvest," I continued. "Before that, by Sorcerer Lycha Umbada ninety-eight years ago on the first day of Coldbreaking."

"Do you even know all of this?" Mira said to Pavo.

"I most certainly do. But I...."

The anger that had been in his voice a moment before had vanished.

"But you what?" I asked.

"Father, you're too slow."

I couldn't believe it. "Put your hand on the stacks, boy. Then somebody ask us a question. Let's see who's slow."

"No. That's not what I mean." Pavo's eyes met mine. "Last month, Sorcerer Tamiqua needed a book urgently. You were sent. You kept him waiting, and he wasn't pleased."

"You didn't tell me that."

"And it wasn't the first time. Even when you use an aster disk, Dad, you're slow. I see you struggling to keep your balance on them. One of these days you'll fall, and then...."

Whether it was my angry energy abandoning me, or the effort of shoving the books onto the floor, I don't know, but with terrible suddenness, my ankle gave way, and I collapsed, landing curled up on my side.

"Father!"

Pavo rushed to my side and reached for my hands, but I batted him away. Mira joined him, and I loved her fiercely for the look she gave me. It wasn't sympathy or pity, but *You stood up to him. I'm proud of you.*

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I didn't feel worthy.

"So, it wasn't my mind," I said to Pavo. "You don't think I'm losing it."

He paused and then shook his head. "Honestly, I wondered about that, too. But after your display of Nexus-knowledge...."

I nodded. We agreed. My body was the problem, not my mind. With the way my ankle felt, I didn't think I'd be walking again for months, if ever. I wanted to weep.

But I would not. My tears would not stain these floors. Their moisture would not pass into the air and contribute in some small measure to the rot and decay of precious paper. I was a codexer, and I loved the Library too much to soil it.

"I relinquish my domain," I said. My voice cracked, and I probably sounded like an old fool, but I was in far too much pain to care.

THEY PLOTTED behind my back.

The gall of them! The nerve! As I sat in my room ashamedly instructing a servant in the packing of my meager assortment of belongings, they met and worked it out. Codexer Mira, I've heard since, put forth the idea initially. Circinus had a heavy hand in it. And my own son, they say, sat there the whole time, nodding and smiling. Then Pavo came and told me to stop packing.

I haven't figured out how to pay them back, yet. Maybe I'll have the children slip egg yolks into their shoes at night, or put crickets in their wardrobes.

"Sagitta!"

I heard the patter of small feet and turned to the source of the call. She had her hands behind her back. Dark curls hung to her brows.

"Cael," I said. "Did you find it?"

She nodded vigorously and withdrew the book from behind her back.

"Good. Where's the others?"

"They're slow. They're coming, though."

"Slow, huh?" I leaned forward in my firm wooden chair, judiciously positioned near the center of the Library, and tickled her. She giggled and squirmed. "That's as bad as it gets. Slow."

"What next?" she asked.

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At that moment, the rest of my students rounded the corner and ran softly down the aisle to join us. One day, when Pavo was ready, he'd relinquish his title, perhaps to one of them.

"There's twelve books out of place, one per axis," I announced. "One for each of you. Find them."

"I'll be back first this time!" Leo said. He'd relinquished his rich red coat for a student's gray.

They dashed to the nearest row and put their hands on the books, listening to the Library's whispers, feeling the flow of its long and winding stacks. Soon, they dashed off.

I called out a final instruction as they trailed away.

"And make it quick!"

COMING ATTRACTIONS

ONE OF THE BEST places to hide (as anyone who has read "The Purloined Letter" knows) is in plain sight. Next month, Claudia O'Keefe explores some hidden American territory in "Maze of Trees," a striking contemporary fantasy. Publishers love to bandy about the word "unforgettable," so much so that the word doesn't have much meaning anymore, but we think you'll find this one fits the bill.

August will also mark the return of Eugene Mirabelli, whose "The Only Known Jump Across Time" seemed to be one of the reader favorites of 2003. His new tale, "The Woman in Schrödinger's Wave Equations," isn't what we'd normally call "science fiction," but it explores one of the mysteries of science in such an intriguing way that we felt compelled to bring it to you.

Also coming your way soon are new stories by Richard Mueller, Matthew Hughes, and Mary Rosenblum. And the big October/November double issue is shaping up nicely, with Peter S. Beagle's return to the world of *The Last Unicorn* highlighting the issue. Go to *www.fsfmag.com* or use the subscription form in this issue to subscribe now so you'll be sure of getting all the goodies coming in the months ahead.

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Perhaps working on a Hollywood project helped form this new tale, a terrific cinematic look at one of the iconic heroes of the twentieth century.

This issue started with a story of knights and wizards, and now it ends with the tale of an iconic hero of more recent vintage—you'll recognize him at once. The question Mr. McAllister poses is, what sort of opportunities does the modern world offer to someone looking to live Happily Ever After?

Bruce McAllister notes he's currently working on a screenplay adaptation of his 1988 novel Dream Baby *with TV and film writer Mike Ajakwe. Perhaps you'll see a bit of the Hollywood influence in this story.*

Hero, the Movie

What's Left When You've Already Saved the World?

By Bruce McAllister

"We're in this together, aren't we, Steve?"

— Janie, *The Blob*

"When man entered the atomic age, he opened a door into a new world. What we will eventually find in that new world nobody can predict...."

— Dr. Medford, *Them!*

"An atom bomb couldn't eradicate this thing."

— Entomologist, on the new breed of fire ant, *National Geographic*, Feb. 1997

The Pitch

THIS ROMANTIC COMEDY begins where all low-budget '50s creature-features ended: The mutant insects born of atom-bomb radiation (or invaders from space, or monsters from the sea, or fifty-foot women) have at last been defeated and our small-town hero, with girlfriend Janie or June

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or Betty at his side, must now face the rest of his life. Didn't we wonder what his life would be like after the final credits rolled? After you save the world, what's left? You can marry the Professor's daughter, sure. You can sell the rights to your story. Be on national talk shows. Hold onto fame a little longer. *But then what?*

The Backstory

The day the giant angry, hungry locusts reached McCulloughville, Nevada (pop. 2000, Elks, Lions, VFW), Rick Rowe was twenty-one. He'd never been to college, but that was okay. He'd never even been to Reno, and that was okay, too. He had a "gypsy red" '57 BelAir convertible he was proud of; and though he knew his parents disapproved, he liked drag racing it with his friends from high school. He'd kissed a girl or two, sure, and even gotten to second base with them, but not without some guilt. He was an upstanding hometown kid and everyone knew it. After all, his parents were fine people. Mr. Rowe was an officer at the McCulloughville Bank; Mrs. Rowe, a housewife. If there was one thing to be said about McCulloughville in 2005, it was that it — and everyone in it — was trapped in the '50s. The golden-oldies stations that managed to reach the car radios played '50s songs, and the parents still talked like Ward and June Cleaver. It was a town ripe for '50s mutant locusts.

Before the mutants ever showed their antennae in McCulloughville, Rick knew insects. One of his responsibilities at the Grange — his job since high school — was to keep them out of the seed stores and to do it without pesticides that would poison the grain. Livestock sometimes ate the grain. Family pets sometimes did too. You couldn't sell poisoned seed. And locusts had always marched through the grass valleys of Northern Nevada. Rick had, by necessity, become an "ecologist" when no one else in town knew what the word meant. He'd talked to old-timers, read books, and knew what kinds of insects you could put in the grain to eat the insects that ate the grain. Assassin bugs ate boll weevils. Parasite wasps ate assassin bugs. He knew about insect *hunger*, and when the locusts hatched like bulldozers from the soil of Duffer's Dry Lake and flew the thirty miles to the ranches that surrounded McCulloughville, it didn't actually surprise him.

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He heard their wings that first night and somehow *knew* what it was even when others thought it was just the wind, or bad radio reception, or jets from Nellis. Even when the locusts marched on the Grange itself and Rick barely escaped with his life, it all made sense. They were *hungry*. They were a whole lot bigger than they were supposed to be, but if you thought about it, that was reason enough to be hungry *and* angry.

They could fly. The brown stuff they spit — the "tobacco" — was corrosive and so foul-smelling it was as effective as mustard gas. Their chitinous exoskeletons were impervious to flamethrowers or armor-piercing, teflon-coated .357 magnum slugs in the hands of the State Police. Their ganglia weren't sophisticated enough to be bothered by the concussion grenades. Fuel-air bombs and "daisy cutters" (ones dropped — thanks to a call from Nevada's Governor — by aircraft from Nellis Airfield) killed hundreds, but hundreds more simply took flight to the next town, the next county and its ranches, the next Grange. Towns were being trashed; the state economy was in tatters; and the locusts were about to deposit their titanic eggs in the endless stretches of dry Nevada soil. Was the end of life as we know it near?

Hunger. That was the word — the feeling, the thought — that haunted Rick day and night as the holocaust waxed. A Professor Price from the big university in Reno had come with his daughter (who assisted him in his work) and had identified the species (*Melanoplus spretus*) and the source of the mutation (a fungus that was a mutant itself); but the Professor saw no solution.

Hunger. Like an FBI psychopath-tracker trying to get inside his man, *Rick got into hunger*. He ate. He ate without utensils. He ate a lot. He made himself feel what they must have been feeling, which was: *I am growing and no matter how much I eat, IT WILL NOT BE ENOUGH*. Monsters though they were, they were no different from the boll weevils and potato bugs and seed mites that plagued every Grange in Nevada and that Rick knew so well. According to the Professor, each mutant would keep eating until it was 376 percent larger than it was now — at which point its exoskeleton would no longer be able to support it in Earth's gravity. But by then its progeny would be out in the world to continue the work — which was eating.

That night it came to him: "Can't we make them eat each other?" he asked.

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The Professor just stared at him.

"They are going to eat, whatever we do, Professor. Can't we make their very hunger our weapon?"

In a flash the Professor saw it. "Yes! Pheromones!"

"I don't understand, Professor."

"Animals smell, Rick: They smell each other. If the smell is right, they mate. Another smell, and they eat. They recognize their food by smell, Rick."

"We can make the locusts smell like *food*?"

"Yes!"

So it was that Rick — a red-blooded American kid who didn't know any world other than his sharp Chevy and a hometown trapped in the '50s — and a distinguished entomologist from a large university sat down to work out a way to stop the "McCulloughville Mutants" — namely, a modified pheromone based on sex hormones but *read* as "food" by the locusts and sprayed by aircraft on the marching, flying hordes.

It was destined to work, so of course it did. The locusts fell upon one other, hunger insatiable, and those that escaped the original spraying were mopped up over the following weeks by more spraying. The gargantuan eggs were never laid and Rick even got to save two little kids from a very irate locust, killing it with a heat-seeking, shoulder-launched Stinger missile. He'd never been a hero before and it felt good.

The TV news footage (which we'll see more than once in our story) shows this:

Rick and the Professor and his daughter, Janie Price, standing between them, the carapace of a giant locust out of focus behind them, the sound of jets above them, the sound of giant insect legs rubbing together but fading, and the TV reporter thrusting his mike into Rick's face with the words: "You're a hero, Mr. Rowe. Tell us how you did it. How did you stop those mutants when no one else — not even the State Police or the Army — could? Your public wants to know."

The Present

We open eighteen months later on a fine suburban home in southern California, 2005. It's Our Hero's house, of course: His trophies and awards for saving his hometown, the State of Nevada, two little kids, probably the

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entire world, line the mantelpiece and wall above the fireplace, along with a framed front-page victory story, a wedding portrait of Rick and Janie, assorted pics of their honeymoon in Hawaii six months ago — leis and all. He stopped the giant locusts, became famous, married the girl, sold his story for seven figures. All is as it should be. Or is it?

Rick and Janie are on their way out and we go with them — jet-skiing, para-sailing, and catamaranning in the bay, lunch with friends on a very buff power yacht, romantic dinner in Beverly Hills. He's still our '50s hero all right, but he's somehow traveled to the new millennium. Right after the defeat of the locusts, we learn, he sold the rights to his story to the nation's favorite tabloid and he's affluent now. There's even talk of a *Rick Rowe Show*. But we see something in his expression as he plays with his toys and enjoys the good life that says he isn't *really* happy. He should be, but he's not.

That night he can't sleep. We watch him toss, turn, get up. We watch him pad his way over to the DVD player and sixty-three-inch Samsung plasma screen in the living room, insert a DVD, sit down on the Umbrian-modern sofa, and, yes, it's the news footage of his McCulloughville exploits — in all their '50s black-and-white glory. He watches with a thousand-yard stare. The footage ends. He goes to menu again, clicks on play, and as he does, Janie — who's somehow still got that '50s hair-and-nightgown look even in a house like this one — emerges sleepy-eyed from the bedroom. "Come to bed, honey," she says. "Daddy wants you at the lab early tomorrow morning. You don't want to disappoint him, do you?"

Rick turns it off reluctantly. He really would like to see the footage again, but she's right — he's got to get up at five o'clock and make the drive to UCLA, where Professor Price now has an endowed chair thanks to those seminal conference papers he delivered on "Pheromonal Response Confusion in *Melanoplus spretus*: A Food/Sex Model." Rick is his laboratory assistant, working once again — but at better pay and benefits — with insects. He doesn't need the job — the tabloid money is there — and he won't need it later when the movie, book and A.M. talk show deals his agent's pushing close. But he's doing it — *working* — for Janie. He loves her, and she likes the idea of her "two *favoritest* people in the world" working together — loving father and famous hero-husband.

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He goes to bed at last. We hold on his eyes in the dark. They're open. He's haunted by something.

Where Rick's Life Is Heading

It's only a week later and Rick is lost. The local press no longer wants follow-up stories. The national press has stopped writing about him completely. The movie has become a low-budget direct-to-video project with "life rights" sold for a paltry $50K, and the talk show has become, if he's lucky, a gig as "The Bug Whisperer" for Animal Planet. The fact is, Rick is old news, and we know what old news is. He stands around at neighborhood barbecues like a zombie, sits for hours in his parked BMW Land Shark just staring through the glass, and at work is beginning to have "concentration problems." He doesn't want to let the Professor down, but he can't help it. He just can't seem to focus and his job performance is slipping. He doesn't know why all of this is happening, but we have our suspicions. We've seen this before in trauma cases: Inability to concentrate, problem with relationships, low-level depression...even *flashbacks*. It's the start of a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, of course, and Rick is about to develop a whopper.

The Professor gets cranky, Rick snaps back, leaves the lab early, and at home finds Janie gone, note on the fridge: "Gone shopping with Babbs and Dottie. Love, Janie." He's angry she's not there, puts the DVD in again and is still watching it two hours later when Janie arrives, mall buys in hand. She doesn't like what she sees. This isn't what a hero does — watching old news footage for hours on end. A hero goes out into the world, slays dragons, makes money, sires children, celebrates science and progress with Daddy at the laboratory, doesn't he? She loves him, sure, but all of this is very disappointing and she leaks her disapproval. He leaks anger back.

That night they make up, try a passionate kiss, but she's tired. "You can wait, can't you, honey?" "Sure," Rick says, but it's the same message he's getting everywhere. When a guy makes love, he's a *hero* — for a moment at least. Ask any teenager. But Rick isn't going to get to be a hero tonight. He's peevish, feels bad about his peevishness, and gets even

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more peevish. He looks up at her face in the faint light of the bedroom, and —

It's the face of a locust, huge, mandibles grinding, the brown sludge on the lips wet and glistening, the antennae waving at him seductively, hideously.

He jumps back as if bitten. It's Janie's face again, looking at him with concern. He gets up, saying, "I don't feel good. Something I ate maybe...."

He keeps looking back at her, ready to see her change again. Even though she doesn't, there's something about her expression — her love, her expectations, her *wanting him to be Someone* — that fills him with horror.

What's happening to me? he asks the world.

His full-blown PTSD has started and he's scared out of his wits. Why an insect? Why would someone I love become an insect? He's walking the hallways of the dark house, wanting so much to watch that old footage again, but also not wanting to. The thought of it scares him. He falls asleep at last on the sofa, under the excellent taxidermy job that's mounted on the wall above him: The giant locust's head, the eyes, the antennae, the mandibles. Another trophy to heroism lost.

His limbs are akimbo on the couch — like a child's or a bum's. The great eyes on the wall regard him stonily in the darkness. His eyes close.

The next few weeks have this in store for Rick:

He will become increasingly dysfunctional because of his syndrome. He will have more hallucinations, more flashbacks, find himself able to concentrate less and less, and both his job and marriage will crash. Janie's father will ask him ("for Janie's sake, Rick") to seek out a man of the cloth — priest, rabbi, Lutheran minister, ayatollah, Tibetan monk — "I really don't care who, son. The problems of the soul are universal...." Rick will see a billboard on his way to work — THE REVEREND FIRESTONE HAS ANSWERS— MAYBE HE HAS YOURS — and it will remind him of McCulloughville, the church he went to as a child. He will indeed seek Reverend Firestone's counsel — only to find himself in a modern-day revival tent, the Reverend screaming about the End Days, the Seven Plagues, one of them *locusts*. Rick will leave in a daze, one hundred dollars poorer and his soul no better off.

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The best book deal his agent can get will be a print-on-demand publisher who wants a pre-order of three thousand copies, and even Animal Planet will fall through. The movie based on his exploits will go into production suddenly and recklessly at the hands of an aging director and two leads with the acting ability of convenience-store clerks. In a wonderfully hideous sequence Rick will get to watch the project implode before his very eyes as the actor playing him (an overweight thirty-five-year-old) gropes the actress playing Janie (a brunette floozie) and the locust — with creature effects from the Muppets studios — collapses on them both. Lawsuit epithets flying, everyone leaves for lunch, and Rick is left standing alone on the set.

By this point Janie will be finding him less and less the hero she thought she'd married and will be unable to hide her frustration. Professor Price, his patience at an end and concern for his daughter mounting, will come down on Rick like a hammer. The inevitable occurs and Janie asks for a divorce: She has found someone else — a policeman, a wonderful guy straight from the '50s who has recently received a city heroism award for saving a woman, her thirteen children, and their seven pets from a trailer fire started by a Little Mermaid nightlight. The policeman, Frank Emerson, has a steady job, solid values, and, like Janie, wants progeny.

Rick loses his job at the laboratory, moves out on his own, and when he sneaks back into the house one night to retrieve his precious footage — his memories, his glory, the only thing he's got now — he triggers the new My Safe Castle security system Frank Emerson has installed for his fiancée. The police — all Emerson's friends — converge on the house, handcuff Rick, and start talking heartily about the barbecue next weekend that Janie and Frank are hosting. Emerson — with what looks like sincere compassion (after all, he *is* a wonderful guy) — puts his arm around the handcuffed Rick and says: "You need help, Rick — the professional kind."

Rick takes the advice. Goes to a shrink — a big red-haired woman who's as narcissistic as they come — and she tells him what we already know: He's got a roaring Delayed Stress Syndrome. What to do about it? Three things, Mr. Rowe: (1) Join a veteran's outreach group, where you'll find people you can relate to and work through the problem with. While you're doing that, (2) offer your services to the community — schools,

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YMCAs, museums. Every community needs a hero. And (3) get a job that's got some adrenaline to it, a thrill, one where you can feel that old Being Important rush — "getting back on the horse," as they say. She adds: "But get a haircut first, Mr. Rowe. And a shave. You look like a bum." And we cut to:

He's gotten the haircut and the shave. He's talking to an elementary school class. He's got his news footage with him and he's showing it to the kids, while the teacher stands in the back, hands on hips. Kids are throwing spitballs and one hits him. One kid has a "Barbie Warrior Princess" doll; another, a full-monty "Malibu Ken" with cute "Partner Brian"; and another, a radio-controlled "Homeland Security Force" action figure whose gender is impossible to determine. They're not impressed. News video, after all, is news video. They've seen *everything* on TV. When the footage ends, he stands up in front of the class and a little girl says: "Why did you have to *kill* them, Mr. Rowe? Animals are important. They're how Mother Nature tells us she loves us, aren't they, Mrs. Spring?" "We've been discussing endangered species, Mr. Rowe," the teacher explains, while a boy says shrilly: "They were one of a kind, Mr. Rowe. They were endangered and you killed them. Why? Why?" The teacher's face becomes a locust. The kids become little locusts. The sound of insect legs rubbing together builds. The floor is the brown of the locust "tobacco." We hear the little girl saying, "I'm glad he's not *my* daddy," as we dissolve to:

A gigantic insect face being painted on the side of what we assume is an airplane fuselage — the way cartoon versions of tanks, planes, and/or blonde pinups were painted on the sides of WWII aircraft. We pull back to see that it's really a Ford E Series commercial van—ZIPLOCK EXTERMINATORS in block letters on its side and two crudely constructed wire insect antennae on its roof — and it's Rick painting carefully but badly the face of an oversized cockroach. He's painted other insects, too, on its side — all rendered terribly — things that look like pregnant ants and headless termites. It's his new job and he's being as "heroic" as he can be. We go with him to the next house on his list and the experience is brief and chilling: A pickup-on-the-dead-lawn stucco tract home with screaming children and a screaming man and woman and there in the darkness, when

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he squints, he can see the rug move. He blinks, squints, and, yes, it *is* cockroaches. There's more insect life here than he ever saw in the Professor's lab. He stands frozen until the kids, sticky from too many soft drinks and unbathed body parts, are swarming around him, pulling him toward the squirming carpet. Minutes later he's spraying the house — the carpet, the sofa, the walls, the kids.

In rapid montage we go through his workday with him — termites, grease-eating ants, boring beetles, mice so filthy they look like insects. Then a final shot of Rick painting a crude Charlie Brown on the side of his van — X's for eyes — and we fade to:

Rick is at a community center that evening, making his first session of the veteran's outreach group. He couldn't be more fish out of water. These vets, not your average, are either enormous guys in denim overalls without shirts, birds of prey and women's names and *Semper Fi* and *Kill Them All and Let God Sort Them Out* tattooed on every inch of them, or little wiry men with haunted eyes who look like serial killers. They talk about "the horrors of the Nam" and the "the gasses of the Gulf" and "the caves of Afghanistan" and Rick, a young Tom Hanks expression on his face, feels like running for his life. But it's his turn now to speak, to share the horror, and all eyes are on him. They're waiting for him — aging boomers, bearded bikers, wiry paranoids — to speak. When he does, he can't help it. He blurts out: "It wasn't horrible for me. I loved it." His eyes are tearing. "Actually, I want it back. *I miss it.*"

Suddenly everyone is crying. They're up, out of their seats, huddled around him, all of them crying. Their great tattooed arms and their dark skinny arms are around him, suffocating him in a group hug, and they're saying, "We know what you mean, Rick. We miss it, too."

When the meeting ends, Rick slips away, makes his way down the night street (his car has of course broken an axle), and hears someone coming after him. It's Chi Chi Escalante, one of those gaunt-eyed wiry paranoids from the group. Worse, he's Hispanic — something no all-American red-blooded boy from McCulloughville can possibly trust. Chi Chi's got a scar on his cheek and to make matters worse he's grinning: *He wants to be friends.* "How about a flick?" he says and Rick mumbles, keeps walking. Chi Chi persists. He knows a bro when he sees one.

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"You're that guy who whacked those bugs, right?" Rick's vanity sparks. He stops walking. "Must have been excellent," Chi Chi says. "Yes, I suppose it was," Rick answers. They walk, they talk. "How about a flick?" Chi Chi asks again.

Why not? Rick thinks. He doesn't even have a DVD player anymore. He can't even watch the old footage.

Chi Chi driving, they go to a dark downtown movie theater — sticky floors, creepy customers, high ceiling with gargoyles glaring down — and it's a Mexican horror movie, one about a human brain kept alive on a catering cart. It's in Spanish, no subtitles, and Chi Chi says: "Man, I grew up on this *basura*." Rick stares. Strangely, he can relate. The hero isn't even Anglo; in fact, he's not sure there *is* a hero; but for a moment he can imagine Chi Chi growing up on it and loving it. But then the food — he hopes it's food — that's holding his shoes to the floor destroys the magic moment and he's got to leave.

"How about a bubbly?" Chi Chi asks. "I know this part of town like my girlfriend's *chi-chis*." Rick shakes his head, breaks away, goes home, where he finds that Frank Emerson has — wonderful guy that he is — broken into his apartment and left a pile of his belongings: Mounted locust head, trophies, awards, wedding pics, belts, socks, cell phone, and keys to a pair of jet skis whose location Rick has forgotten. And a note: "Thought you might want these. Frank."

The cell phone's battery is dead, he doesn't have a land line, and pay phones that work, he's about to discover, are as rare as whooping cranes. When he finds one three hours later, he calls Chi Chi. "Yeah, I'd like a drink," he says. "I'd like one very much, *amigo*."

They drink. In fact, Chi Chi gets him plastered at an East L.A. bar and before we know it they're staggering out of a tattoo parlor on Hollywood Boulevard and Rick's got, on his forearm, a rather large bird of prey clutching what looks like a small fishing pole.

"A hero's got to have a tattoo!" Rick announces shit-faced as we fade out and back in to:

Another montage, even quicker, of the next workday — the van, Rick's tattooed arm painting another species of vermin on the side of the

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van, the houses he visits, the very real world of people and their insects. When the montage stops this time, it's in an old man's vegetable garden...the grasshoppers that are eating his corn and lettuce. We hold on Rick sitting cross-legged in the dirt, holding one of the little locusts as it kicks in his hand doing its best to live. The old man comes out, looks confused, then angry. Rick looks up with an expression like Christ's: *Suffer the little insects to come unto me.* "I'm sorry. I just can't do it," he says, placing the creature gently back on a head of lettuce, gets up and leaves. We jump to:

His company's office, where Rick is quitting. We don't hear what they're saying. His boss is pissed and he's pointing at Rick's van. Rick gets a can of turpentine and a rag and removes his artwork. When he's through, he looks terrible. His hair has grown like hybrid grass. He's got a beard. He does look like a bum.

But he's got a DVD player now and a high-end camera phone — thanks to Chi Chi, who's got street connections up the wazoo. He doesn't know how to work the camera, picture caller ID, Bluetooth® connectivity or much else, but who cares? He calls Janie and leaves his number and that evening gets a call: They've got vampire bats in Cleveland, the voice says — millions of them. They know who he is — he's the only one who can stop these things — and they need him right now. The Mayor's office, the National Guard, the Highway Patrol — they all need him. His heart is racing. He's smiling like a kid. It's happening — finally happening. He can feel the adrenaline, the thrill, the joy, the glory — how important he's going to be in the universe again — but then it starts: the laughter on the other end.

It's a joke, he realizes. They're Frank's friends. They've got to be.

He turns off the cell, feeling sick to his stomach.

He watches the old footage. The mounted locust head, still lying in a corner of the room, stares up at him and his cell starts ringing again. He's chosen a chirpy bird song for the ring and regrets it. He hesitates — but picks it up. He can hope, can't he? This time the voice barely gets a sentence out before it cracks up. It's giant chickens in Duluth this time, but the voice — enjoying itself, other voices in the background enjoying themselves, too — can't even get the next sentence out and Rick ends it,

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leaves and walks the streets, which are dark and haunting now. We see tears in his eyes.

Rick and Chi Chi hang out. More drunkenness. Hitting on working girls, babes in singles bars, hotties with dates whose dates arrive late and surly. Rick falls on his face in a stupor before anything — good or bad — can happen. Close on his tattooed arm hanging in a gutter. The eagle looks more like a parrot.

He keeps his cell off, but knows the messages will keep coming. Frank's friends, friends of friends, anyone who wants a laugh. He stays away from his apartment as much as he can — even goes to more Mexican horror movies with Chi Chi — but in the end he still listens to the calls.

When he's not with Chi Chi he walks the streets alone. One night, bleary from drink, he sees a very attractive blonde being mugged by a street gang that's so ethnically diverse it looks like a UNESCO poster. He's never seen a mugging before and it takes a moment before he realizes exactly what's going on and why God must have led him here: *His chance to be a hero.* He has righteousness on his side. The gang will sense this.

But before Rick is halfway to her the young woman nails two of the gang with her purse. Her wig flies off and it's not a young woman at all but a very ticked-off transvestite who's swinging a bag that weighs more than a basset hound. He's fast, hairy legs pumping as he disappears down an alley just as Rick arrives. The gang turns to face him.

The gang's feelings are hurt, it would seem. They've been shamed and need to take their feelings out on somebody. The leader of the gang explains this to Rick rather cheerfully. The last shot we see is of a blue Dewey Dumpster in the alley, Rick's head rising slowly out of it covered with ketchup, the insides of melons, and other produce almost but not quite hiding his black eye. We push in on all the flies swarming around him. They make a halo around his head as we cut to:

Rick, despondent, phoning Chi Chi from his dark apartment, only to hear this: "Message for Pablo and Dennis and Maria and Reek. Sorry, homies, but I can't take this civilian sheet no more. I re-upping today."

His best friend has reenlisted, for Christ's sake. Rick looks down at

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the floor in the darkness. Bugs — hundreds of dark, featureless bugs — scuttle across the linoleum. Cut to:

Rick heading home at last — to McCulloughville — on a seedy Greyhound bus. He can't take it anymore and it's only in McCulloughville, he tells himself, that he'll be able to put the terrible realities of 2005 America behind him. His bruises show. His black eye makes him look like a raccoon. His hair and beard seem to have grown at an inhuman rate. As he gets closer to home, the billboards get older, some of the products no longer made: Ipana Toothpaste. Carter's Little Liver Pills. Burma Shave. Buick Roadmaster With Dynaflow. The cars passing the bus get older too and the clothing of those driving warp back to the '50s as well. Rick Rowe is going home at last.

As the bus slides into the McCulloughville station, we see the town. It hasn't changed. Rick may have saved it from the mutant locusts, but something else has saved it from the new millennium: It's still the Small Town of *The Blob*, *Them!*, and all those other '50s horror flicks, and it's the only home Rick's got.

A little museum has been built to commemorate him and he goes there first. He remembers hearing about it. The docent at the door — an old lady who's not quite sure where she is, or who — doesn't recognize him, and what he finds inside is a shock. The two giant locusts that have been preserved, reassembled and put on display are covered with dust. The lighting in the place sucks. There aren't any school children or elderly couples on tour. In fact, there isn't anyone in the museum except a pair of teenagers — a boy with slicked-back hair and a girl with a mohair sweater — necking behind the left hind leg of the locust occupying the darkest corner of the room. When they notice him, they laugh, he hears a word that sounds like "wino" and he realizes what he must look like. He can't let the town see him like this. As he leaves he sees a portrait of himself under a burnt-out bulb: Someone has drawn a mustache on his upper lip and antennae on his head....

He checks into the main hotel, signs in under "Smith," and pays cash. Somehow it's still ten dollars — just what it used to cost in the '50s. He showers and shaves and as a haircut settles for removing the hair from the back of his neck with a razor. He puts on the one set of clothes he's got in

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his bag, downs two cups of Folger's coffee in the hotel's bar, and in the mirror over the bar practices smiling.

He ambles down the street and it's McCulloughville all right, town of his childhood, site of his glory, and the smile is for real now. His eyes are wide and he's happier than he's been in a long time —

Until a couple passes him and the look they give him is deadly — as if he were diseased. Maybe they don't recognize him. It's a small town. Maybe they think he's a stranger and —

There, across the street, is Buddy Blaylock, his best friend from McCulloughville High School. Rick moves toward him quickly, hand raised for the hello that's about to come out of his mouth, and as Buddy Blaylock turns —

We see the same expression. Daggers.

"Hello, Rick," Buddy says.

Rick is ebullient: "Gee, it's great to see you, Buddy. Gee, you're looking good. How's Spooky. How's the Ford?"

Buddy stares at him and it's not friendly. "How's the big city, Rick? Treatin' you well?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Rick lies.

"Glad to hear that because some of us had to stay here in McCulloughville after you left — to keep things going. Know what I mean?"

Rick doesn't know what he means. Patty Rippey, Buddy's girlfriend, comes out of the market and stops, the same look on her face. "Well, if it isn't *The Rick Rowe.*"

"Yeah, if it isn't," Buddy says.

They're looking at him like he's a pedophile. "It's been great, Rick," Buddy says suddenly, "but I need to get back to work now. You know, *work*. What people do on weekdays. But you have fun now, hear?"

Rick is left standing in the street as the two drive away in Buddy's blue-and-white '56 Ford with tuck-and-roll.

Rick walks on. He sees people working. He sees men in pickup trucks working, men and women in stores working, secretaries in offices working, a covey of housewives shopping. It's McCulloughville, all right, but it's the real world now, a McCulloughville he doesn't remember.

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Whatever happened (he asks himself) to the good old days of hotrodding and moonlight necking and Christmas trees where boys and girls opened their presents in their jammies and Dean Martin sang "White Christmas" — and everything else from a world where the aliens were aliens and you knew who you were?

It's gone because you left it, Rick, a voice says, the one that always talks this way, *because you became a Hero and left.*

He walks on, finally finds himself before his parents' house. It looks the same. The lawn, the trees. The sunlight feels like the sunlight he remembers. He rings the doorbell, running his fingers through his hair. It's Friday, the day his father often takes off from bank duties, and maybe he'll be here. His mother certainly will. Mr. and Mrs. Rowe are inseparable. The family — the three of them — were inseparable.

His father answers it in his suit and stands there in the doorway. Rick can see a figure moving in the background and knows it's his mother.

"Come in," his father says. That's all. Just "Come in."

"Hello, Rick," his mother says inside, and Rick blinks. It's dark. He can't see anything in this sudden change of light. "Have a seat on the couch," his father says. Rick goes toward his mother to hug her but can't see her, bumps into a table and when his vision clears he sees it: Her face. Her expression. "It's good to see you, Rick," she says, but it's just a courtesy. She was always courteous to everyone. "Yes, son, it is," his father echoes. "How is Los Angeles treating you, son?"

"Things could be better," Rick says — wondering whether he should tell them.

"I'm very sorry to hear that," his father says, and silence follows. His father doesn't ask what's wrong. His mother is sitting in the big stuffed chair opposite the sofa, where Rick is sitting, and his father doesn't sit down. "Is there anything we can do, son?" one of them asks — he's not sure which — but it's only a courtesy.

"How are you both?" Rick asks. "I miss you," he says.

"We miss you too," his mother says, robotic.

Then his father says it: "We've wondered about you and we've worried, as parents do. We wouldn't have worried so much, son — especially your mother — if you'd written to us or phoned us more...."

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Rick can't believe it. He did call them, he wants to say. He did write. At least at the beginning. They'd come to his wedding. They'd seen the house. Maybe over the past few months, with everything so crazy, he'd neglected to stay in touch — but that was because he'd been embarrassed, because he didn't want to burden them with his troubles.

He starts to explain all of this, to apologize, but the two of them — like cutouts, cardboard characters in some terrible '50s Aliens-Among-Us movie — just stand there staring at him.

"I came because I wanted to see you," he's saying, but they don't answer. "I wanted to see if McCulloughville was the same. I wanted to let you know that I think about you constantly, even if things have been pretty crazy and I haven't had much chance to —

"Is that a tattoo on your arm, son?" his father asks sternly.

Rick gets up. He's got to leave. His father says more gently: "There's a twenty-five-dollar savings bond.... We found it in the attic the other day. If you need money, you could cash it.

"No," Rick tells him. "I'd rather keep it here. You know, knowing it's here...in the house where I grew up...." Then his mother says: "You look terrible, Rick. You wouldn't look so terrible if you got a haircut."

Rick is walking fast down the street, away from the house where he spent his childhood, turning once, despite himself, to wave at the two shadowy figures just inside the doorway. And then he's free — free from this new horror — and we cut to:

Rick returning to the Greyhound Bus, somewhere between McCulloughville, Year of Our Lord 1958, and southern California, 2005. And we fade to:

Rick, at night, listening to his cell messages in the darkness of his apartment. If it's dark, he doesn't have to look at the bugs so much. There's a message asking him to save San Francisco from bad Italian sopranos. A call informing him that UFOs posing as convenience stores are kidnapping citizens in New Jersey. A call about radioactive prostitutes in Chicago and one about little red crabs that have invaded a town in Florida. Dissolve to:

Rick, the next day, trying to find the veteran's outreach group — but it's moved and no one knows where.

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That evening, Rick's cell has only one message: A man representing the mayor of Corkscrew, Florida, saying that he called yesterday and would appreciate it if Mr. Rowe would call him back. The man, very serious — somehow not laughing — keeps talking, and we hold on Rick's eyes in the darkness — insect-like, faceted, despairing. "Do you have a fax or email, Mr. Rowe?" the voice asks.

We see the horrific nightmare he has that night — a perfect amalgam of everything he's gone through over the past few weeks: Locusts, little kids spitting "tobacco," Janie with thirteen children, his parents telling him, "Get a haircut — get a shave — you look like a bum." And then:

The sound of his cell chirping brings us out of the nightmare into the bleakness of his apartment. At least the insects have returned to the walls for the day. He struggles up, angry, ready to read the prankster the riot act if he can only get through the piles of dirty clothes and trophies to the cell in time.

"Mr. Rowe?"

"Now you listen to me — "

"I know it's early, Mr. Rowe, but we have a problem down here — "

"If I ever find out who you are you — "

"The crabs are *Gecarcoidea natalis*, a non-native species introduced by accident twenty years ago, and we're having a hard time containing them. We believe that you — given your experiences with *Melanoplus spretus* — may be able to help us. We'd be willing to pay your airfare and expenses — and a respectable consultant's fee — if you'll visit us for a week. Corkscrew is a gracious town and we can promise you our hospitality...."

Rick stops. Something about the voice....

The man, the Floridian accent sounding real, keeps on talking and Rick finally gets it: *It's legit* — there's a REAL town with a REAL problem down there in Florida somewhere. *And they want his help.*

MIDPOINT
OR HOW THIS CALL WILL CHANGE RICK'S LIFE

Rick is looking a whole lot older now — thirty-three, not twenty-three — but he's been through a lot recently. And he's right: This phone

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call is going to be important, though not in the way he imagines.

Rick takes the money the mayor of Corkscrew has wired him and flies to Florida, feeling his oats, full of hope. He's met at the airport by one of Mayor Delameter's staff and driven to his hotel, the old but clean and dry Swamp Hotel in downtown Corkscrew. The next morning he's out at the edge of town where Main Street runs along the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary and he's surveying the marching battalions of *Gecarcoidea natalis* — little red forest-dwelling crabs about the size of your palm that are migrating, as they do each year — though not usually in such numbers — through the town back to the swamp to breed...and taking their sweet time doing it. The mayor and his staff are present. The local press is present. And so is a woman, early thirties too, who doesn't seem to fit this south Florida scene: She's dressed somewhere between Banana Republic and L. L. Bean, attractive and confident but understated, and she stands off from the group with her arms crossed and an amusement on her face that he finds disturbing. No one bothers to introduce them, and Rick doesn't ask who she is — though he can't ignore her.

"Well, what do you think, Mr. Rowe?" the Mayor asks. "What can we do about this little problem of ours? We can't touch their breeding grounds in the swamp. They're protected."

"What are their natural predators, Mayor?" Rick answers, giving it his best.

"They don't seem to have any, Mr. Rowe. Not enough to matter."

"That's not possible," Rick answers. "Every animal this size has — or once had or would have if you moved it somewhere else — a natural predator. That's a basic scientific concept, Mayor."

The Mayor, his staff, the press and the other citizens present look at each other and shrug. No one looks at the woman in Birkenstocks.

"Coons," someone says at last.

Rick freezes. "What?"

"Raccoons, Mr. Rowe," the Mayor says.

"Yeah," someone else says, "I've seen coons eat them. They'll eat crayfish, frogs, even a hefty turtle if they can get into one."

"There's your solution, Mayor," Rick says.

Everyone looks at everyone else again. They're willing to believe. They just need encouragement.

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"How much does a raccoon cost?" Rick asks.

"Hell," someone says, "you can probably get the Seminoles over at Pahokee to round up two hundred or three hundred of 'em for five bucks a head. Take 'em a couple of weeks maybe. They don't have anything else to do."

"You'll need more than that," Rick says quickly. "And you'll need them quicker."

"My sister's brother," someone else offers, "works for Water and Power in Baton Rouge. I'll bet we could get a thousand in less than a week from the Cajuns. Cheaper, too."

The Mayor's staff calculates and recalculates and at two thousand raccoons it's going to cost the city somewhere between ten thousand and fifteen thousand dollars — transportation included — which is great. But suddenly someone is laughing and everyone turns. It's the woman and she's really enjoying it.

"Mr. Rowe," the Mayor says, and he's not happy, "this is Dr. Field. Dr. Susan Field."

Susan Field, Rick learns, is an ecologist trained at the Woods Hole Institute in Massachusetts who's lived in Corkscrew for five years. She's laughing, he also learns, because the introduction of that many raccoons to the area would not only put a hundred native birds, by egg theft, on the endangered species list, but would destroy the tropical fish farms upon which twenty percent of the economy of Corkscrew County depends. "Remember how the 'walking catfish' hurt those farms in the early '80s?" she says. The crabs may be an annoyance, she adds, but they don't impact the local economy at all the way two thousand bandit-eyed predators would.

Rick is devastated.

All he can think to say is:

"What do these crabs *want*?"

"They seem, Mr. Rowe," she tells him, while the mayor and his staff glare with hostility, "to want to get back to their swamp and breed...and we happen to be in the way. They also like hanging out in town as they do it...."

"Parasites?" Rick says, trying anything.

"Crab parasites don't distinguish between arthropods," she says. "We'd kill the crayfish and other crabs in the sanctuary. And you don't kill crayfish in the South, Mr. Rowe."

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"Topical pesticides?"

"Our good Mayor tried that once," Susan Field answers, smiling at Delameter, "despite objections from a humble ecologist from New England, and the federal government hit us with a fine in the six-figure area. That's not science, Mr. Rowe, but it is politics."

"I'll need," Rick mumbles feebly, "to think about it. I'd like...to spend tomorrow looking at whatever reports...and other documents...you may have on the history of the problem, Mayor."

"Good idea, Mr. Rowe," Susan Field says, still amused and very unwilling to let him off the hook. Why did he ever think this would work?

He flees to his hotel room, sits on his bed, stares at the wall, and when night falls makes his way to a bar just outside of town, cap pulled down to hide his face.

Then these things happen:

Susan Field tracks him down at the bar. It's a very small town, word travels, and he's the only one with an L.A. Lakers cap. She even shows compassion. Rick isn't yet drunk, but he's certainly doing his best to drown his sorrows in Gator Piss Beer. She makes chat — telling him a little about herself, her graduate work in wetlands ecology, the politics of environmental issues in the South, *safe* things to talk about — and then she asks him about himself. He hides the truth; more accurately, he lies. He tells her about all of the heroic things he's done since McCulloughville. It's easy when you're drunk. Polar bear infestation in Inuit villages and how he used inflatable seal decoys filled with laughing gas to subdue them. A Nessie-like plesiosaur (though smaller) in Vermont's Lake Champlain, wreaking nocturnal havoc at two marinas, and how bagpipe music played on an old PA system helped him catch it....

She's not easily fooled. She sees a man who's in agony, and, though we won't know why until our story's through, she invites him back to her house for the night. "I've got an extra room," she says. Rick brightens. An attractive woman inviting him back to her house for the night? Maybe he's still got that Hero magic. Maybe Janie was wrong. Maybe his science isn't so off.

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When they reach her house, an old Florida bungalow with endless verandahs, the bubble bursts and he discovers she's got a ten-year-old son — Jacob — and it's his room that Rick will share tonight. The room is a waking nightmare: It's filled with insects. Insects mounted on pins, arranged neatly in drawers and glass cases, each with an information card. Insect mobiles hang from the ceiling. The wallpaper has insect designs. Large plastic models of insects sit on the dresser. Rick wants to scream. But the boy is entranced: This is Rick Rowe — the man who stopped the mutant *Melanoplus* in northern Nevada. The boy knows all of it, about *Melanoplus*, about Rick, and his eyes are wide with adoration. Rick should love this attention, but he doesn't. He slips away to use the bathroom and as he does overhears Jacob whisper to his mother, "Don't tell him, please, Mom." She smiles. "I won't. Not unless you want me to."

Susan retires to her bedroom early ("I'm an early riser — you two have fun") as the wimpy, chunky, bespectacled Jacob bombards him with questions and takes him on a tour of every species in the room. The tour lasts late into the night.

Lying on the bottom bunk at last — Jacob's heavy body asleep just above him — Rick, not surprisingly, has nightmares about insects.

Rick remains in Corkscrew. He remains in Susan Field's house, in fact. She insists, and the intensity of her insistence is a little scary. But he has no place else to go and there's something real, something human in this little world with its bug-collecting ten-year-old, this female Ph.D. who teases Rick mercilessly but somehow affectionately, this town with its crab problem that seems not to be much of a problem after all. It feels, strangely, like home.

He gets a job as a driver for a local water-bottle company and he learns who this woman really is. How Susan Field, still a graduate student at Woods Hole, came to study the ecosystem of the Corkscrew Swamp, wore her bug-proofed Birkenstocks and Baffin swamp boots dutifully, and on her very first day in town met Joshua Covington — liberal politician born somewhere in Florida (so he said), relocated here just before she arrived, ten years her senior, divorced, one son. How (though she'd never imagined herself a stepmother) she'd stayed, married him and they'd spent half their

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honeymoon talking about ways to save the swamp. How Joshua Covington died in an auto accident three years later, how she was the only one Jacob had left, and how soon after, the chubby boy, who obviously loved her, took up bug-collecting.

As she tells him these things, she won't look at Rick and he doesn't know why. Her eyes shift away as if she doesn't want him looking at them. He hears something in her voice, too, that makes him think she might be lying. But about what? Her life is obviously what she says it is, and she seems honest. What would she lie about?

As he works beside her in her home office, Rick learns what the new millennium is really about — not the stopping of alien blobs with fire extinguishers or giant locusts with food pheromones, but *politics*. He learns that the Mayor, going on his fifth term of office and always re-election-conscious — wants the little red suckers with pinchers stopped because the more powerful among his doddering constituents are *annoyed* by them. They're not a physical threat to the citizens or an economic burden on the county. They're a natural phenomenon and after each yearly migration their little red exoskeletons lie fading in the sun, crushed by car tires, toyed with by curious pets, even turned into godawful tourist souvenirs by local craftsmen. But they're an embarrassment to the businessmen of the town, the ones who live in the big colonial homes; and because they are, the mayor wants them stopped. And, Susan explains, Mayor Delameter is not going to listen to a Northerner — some female Yankee doctor of "bah-ah-logee" from Massachusetts, widow of a "leftist reformer" — about how to do that. The situation is hopeless, she says.

Rick turns moody, homesick for something he can't even articulate, and Susan takes him to a '50s sci-fi horror film series at the local Corkscrew theater — a theater straight from *The Blob*. She makes fun of the movies: Their portrayal of women. The buffer-than-life heroism. The black-and-white values. The cardboard people. He begins to see these things in a new light. These aren't movies about real people. They're about cartoon characters who never lived and never could live in a real world.

She teases him about his tattoo, too, but behind the teasing there's that affection, and so he listens.

Jacob gets sick a lot — the "flu," she tells him, and Rick doesn't think

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much about it. The boy doesn't get much exercise, is chubby, so it isn't surprising. He's just not in shape. He likes the kid, sure, but there are limits — and when the boy has the flu it gives Rick a legitimate excuse to bow out, to have time to himself. After all, when he isn't sick, the boy follows him everywhere, pumping him for information. One day he gifts Rick his one and only plastic replica of the "McCulloughville Mutants." "I didn't even know they made them," Rick confesses. "Sure," Jacob says. "They had a computer game too. *McCulloughville!* Every time you killed a mutant you got to street-race this old car. I had a copy but I loaned it to a guy at school and he moved. It wasn't very good. The locusts looked like chickens."

Rick watches the Mayor's commandos attempt to address The Crab Problem — flamethrowers, traps, poison. The burning crabs stink to high heaven and the live ones simply carry the traps off in a tidal wave of red bodies. It's pathetic, Rick sees. Like a parody of those '50s creature-features, in fact.

When Susan's cat, DNA, crawls into the shower stall to die and Susan cries — saying, "They're using the poison again" — it loses all humor.

One night Rick stands in the darkness of the porch and watches the crabs marching through the creek near the house. They're marching *because they must*, he realizes. They're full of courage and sheer will, he sees. Does he have this kind of courage and will? he wonders.

He takes Jacob — just the boy this time — to a '50s flick at last and finds himself poking fun at the Hero and The Girlfriend and The Professor and the State Police and how easy it all is. "If life weren't worth living, it wouldn't be so hard," he hears himself saying, amazed. As he sits there in the theater with Jacob Covington, we know he's discovering what it means to care about someone — someone who needs you and doesn't have the power you do. It feels good. It even makes him feel — in a calm, quiet way — like a hero. The boy loves him. The boy falls asleep — that big goofy moon face with glasses — on his arm during their third movie in a row and Rick doesn't wake him, even when Rick's arm falls asleep.

When the lights come on, Rick sees a rash on Jacob's arms, one he hasn't seen before. He'll mention it to Susan when they get home. But as

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they leave the theater and he looks at Jacob's arms again, the rash is gone. Was it just the lighting in the theater?

As they walk down Main Street, checking out the shops, they stop to buy T-shirts. Rick buys the boy one with a bug on it — a big, bright beetle. It feels good to do it. Jacob buys him a T-shirt with a bug on it, too — a giant millipede — and Rick must wear it. They wear their shirts together as they walk down the street. Though it's embarrassing at first, it grows on him. At least it's not McCulloughville Mutants.

One night he finds a photograph of Joshua Covington and studies it, looks in at Jacob sleeping in his bed, and sighs. Fathers. Sons.

Rick could have moved out of Jacob's room by now — onto the porch that Susan has recently had enclosed — but he doesn't.

The next day he sees the rash on Jacob's arms again and mentions it to Susan.

"It's all right," she says. "It comes and goes. It's not contagious." And we cut to:

Rick destroying his news footage tapes — the tapes of his old glory. He's got a smile on his face. Acceptance at last. Some peace.

And then it happens:

They're all watching television in the living room — fireplace, everything — in Susan's house. It's been a busy day on the water-bottle route and another two hours — Susan and Rick together — at the office of the "Save the Swamp" club, which Susan helped found. A news bulletin interrupts the regular broadcast: "They're coming out of the sea at Galveston!" the announcer shouts.

What are?

The aliens, of course. Looking like aquatic triceratops with rubber horns, they're swarming from the Gulf of Mexico and bringing the wrecks of old boats and airplanes, the detritus of the Bermuda Triangle, with them. And they're mad as hell. Global warming and the gulf currents have cracked their stealthy underwater domes and they're pissed, ready to tangle. Shots of fleeing Galvestonites. Shots of dripping creatures the size and color of M1 tanks. And it's all real.

Rick listens — and to his horror feels elation. It's happening again, a

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voice says. A chance for that old glory. He resists. Hasn't he learned anything at all from the past few months — from Susan, Jacob, and her world? He's *one* man, one human being — a mortal one at that — and there's a world for him here in Corkscrew. A home. A family.

Vanity rears its head like a cobra, but he resists.

"Great," he says at last, grinning. "The aliens are ruining the beaches in Texas. So what?" Susan and Jacob laugh, but it's a nervous laugh and Rick doesn't know why.

He notices Susan's elbow. The light's dim but he could swear the elbow has the same red rash. Is he imagining things? Is this some mental trick — some odd residue of his PTSD?

"You don't have that rash, too, do you?" he says to her before they turn the lights out.

"No," she says quickly, and she's right. When he looks at her elbow, the rash is gone.

The next day the first fax arrives on Susan's home machine: "Mr. Rowe, we need you." Signed: The Mayor of Galveston.

And another the next day — from the Office of Emergency Services in Texas: "You're needed!" And cell messages, real ones: One from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. One from the *Miami Herald:* "Word is that you've been approached about the Galveston crisis. What are your plans, Mr. Rowe?"

Cell in hand, Rick folds.

He stands before Susan. "They need me," he says. "They really do. I've got to go." His heart is beating like a railroad track. It's McCulloughville all over again and he's got to live his story. He's got to. Certainly she'll understand. "A man's got to do what he's got to do," he says. Someone once said that. Someone in a movie, he's sure.

"It's not real," she says.

"Of course it's real, Susan. It wouldn't be on the news if it wasn't real — "

"I don't mean it like that."

"Then how do you mean it?"

When she doesn't answer, he says: "I was hoping you'd understand." He's angry. If she really cared for him, she'd understand, wouldn't she?

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"Maybe *we* need you," she says quietly.

"Come with me — both of you," he says — brightening.

"We can't, Rick. It's not our story." She turns away. Jacob has the flu again and she's got to take his temperature every hour on the hour. Doctor's orders.

Finally, he says: "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry." She's looking away, as always, but making it easy for him. "I'll explain to Jacob what's happened. He'll understand. You'll still be his hero."

Rick takes the old Ford pickup that's been languishing in Susan's garage for years and speeds toward Galveston. You'd think he'd be on a freeway at least, but he's not — it's a highway like Route 66 and the billboards have the old brand names and slogans again — "See the USA in your Chevrolet" and "No Closer Call...Than Burma Shave" — and the few cars that pass him in the night are just as old as his. The broken line down the center of the road mesmerizes him and his life flashes before his eyes. We see what he sees: McCulloughville, his parents, Buddy Blaylock and his car, Susan, Jacob, Chi Chi Escalante. We see all of the versions of Rick Rowe we've seen over the past few months. Something's happening to Rick as he drives. We're not sure what, but it's important.

Finally he sees *himself* as a locust — alien, wide-eyed, exoskeleton shimmering blue and green...and somehow it's all right.

He stops the car, pulls a U, and drives back. When he arrives at the house, the doctor is there. Rick looks at the boy, the doctor, Susan, and knows suddenly that it hasn't been the "flu" all these months.

"How long has he had this?" he asks her.

"Since we arrived."

He doesn't know what she means. Arrived?

"What is it — what does he have?" Ricks asks.

"A muscle weakness. A problem with the muscle sheaths.... I don't know the scientific name. I'm not sure there even is one, Rick. Dr. Patterson has never seen anything like it."

"Shouldn't he be at a hospital — with specialists?"

"That's not possible."

"You mean money?"

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She ignores him, looking at Jacob and the doctor instead, and all Rick can think to say is, "Will it get worse?"

She smiles a little, looking at him for a moment, and he realizes he loves that smile. It's a little off, a little higher on one side, and her teeth are awfully small, but he loves it. "Maybe...maybe not." She says it with resignation and he remembers that she always says that: *Maybe, maybe not.* No assurances. No billboard-large promises.

"He idolizes you," she says quietly.

"He doesn't really know me."

"He knows what he needs to know," she says.

There's an awkward silence between them as the doctor finishes his checkup on the sleeping boy. Rick notices the doctor's hands. They've got the same red streaky rash on them that Jacob's arms had in the theater, that Susan's elbow had. He stares. The rash remains. *It's real,* he sees. Very real. He starts to say something about it, but the doctor looks up at him and there's something odd about his eyes — the doctor won't look at him either — so Rick says instead:

"There'll be other aliens, other monsters, right?"

"Of course," she answers. "There always are...."

She's seen Rick's look and knows it's time. It's time to tell him. She holds out her hands, and there it is, the rash — but as he looks the red turns blue and green, shining like a rain-forest butterfly wing, and it's her skin, he realizes, not a rash. And when he looks up at her face, her eyes aren't what he remembered at all. They're an incredible blue — like space between the stars — and they don't have pupils, and her teeth look a little more pointed than he remembered them. It's real, he knows.

Sometimes what you want, she's saying, though her mouth isn't moving, *isn't very far away.*

He touches her hands and they're thinner than he remembers, and maybe there's an extra finger.

It's the atmosphere of your planet, she says, *that's making him sick. But he wants to be here. I'm all he's got. We're all we've got.*

We need you, Rick, she's saying. *We knew you were the one when we saw you on television that day. So brave. We knew you wouldn't be afraid — that you of all people would be willing to help....*

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He's staring at her, unable to speak. Even if he could, what would he say?

I was the one, she adds, *who got the mayor to call you. He's not one of us. There are only five. Jacob's dad was the sixth. We had to get you here. I'm sorry.*

He's holding her hands now and, though her skin should bother him, it doesn't. She's still the woman he knows, even if she's something else. He nods. She steps toward him, puts her arms around him, her pupilless eyes only a few inches from his, and hugs him, really hugs him. It feels good. He knows what they must be feeling — Susan, Jacob, the doctor and the others — alone here, not knowing what's going to happen to them, bodies not really all that different from his. *After all, we come from the same galactic seed, don't we?* a voice says — the one that always talks like this.

"I'm glad you didn't go," she says in his ear, this time with words, and he's hugging her back now — a real, honest-to-goodness hug between two beings who've become good friends and who may yet, God and anatomy willing, become lovers.

As they hug, we see a tattoo on her forearm — a very patriotic eagle clutching arrows — something that wasn't there a few days ago, something she's put there for him, and this tells us that whatever else she might be feeling, whatever else she might be, she loves him — and isn't that what really matters in a universe or a movie like this one?

We fade to blue sky.

Or stars.

Or a newborn baby.

Or whatever else feels right.

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F&SF COMPETITION #69

"Pre-Therapy Titles"

COMPETITION #69 asked entrants to supply the pre-therapy title of a current genre book or short story. A reminder to all: *F&SF* competitions deal with science fiction or fantasy titles. Humorous entries involving *Moby-Dick* were sadly disqualified.

A shout-out to the multitudes who submitted *Sandbox* for *Dune* and *Secretary of the Rings* for *Lord of the Rings* and variations thereof.

WINNERS:
FIRST PLACE

Current Title: *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, by Connie Willis

Before Therapy: *Say Nothing to the Dog. He Tells Me to Do Bad Things*

— Mark Shainblum
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Mr. Shainblum had several entries worthy of note:

Current Title: *The Left Hand of Darkness*, by Ursula K. Le Guin

Before Therapy: *The Left Hand of Derek Is His Best Friend*

Current Title: *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, by Robert A. Heinlein

Before Therapy: *The Man Is a Harsh Mistress*

Current Title: *Earth Is Room Enough*, by Isaac Asimov

Before Therapy: *The Crawlspace Under the Stairs Is Room Enough*

Current Title: *Man Plus*, by Frederik Pohl

Before Therapy: *Size Isn't Important, Right?*

SECOND PLACE

Current Title: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick

Before Therapy: *Do Androids Dream of Killing Their Creators and Then Marrying Their Creators and in What Sort of Paranoid, Identity-Conflicted World Would That Be a Viable Lifestyle?*

— Pat Scannell
Framingham, MA

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RUNNERS-UP

Current Title: *She*, by H. Rider Haggard
Before Therapy: *He*

— Sean T. M. Stiennon
Madison, WI

Current title: *All the Lies That Are My Life*, by Harlan Ellison
Before therapy: *Yeah, Um, I'm a Movie Star, Sure, and Also Do Triathalons*

— Charles Coleman Finlay
Columbus, OH

A special mention to the book that received therapy after publication:

Current Title: *Conan the Conqueror*, by Robert Howard
After Therapy: *Conan the Consensus-Builder*

— Michael Canfield
Seattle, WA

F&SF COMPETITION #70

THE 2055 HUGO AWARDS: The Hugo Committee has changed with the times, and in the year 2055, not all categories are the same. Look into the future and channel no more than six categories and their winners. Examples:

BEST NOVEL (Assimilated): *Dune 26: Photocopies of Dune*, by Tanya Herbert with Brian Herbert
BEST ANTHOLOGY (Interactive): *Again, Dangerous Mad Libs*, by Harlan Ellison's brain

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 240 West 73rd St. #1201, New York, NY 10023-2794, or e-mail entries to carol@cybrid.net. Be sure to include your contact information. Entries must be received by July 15, 2005. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*, and their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*.

PRIZES: First prize will receive a signed first edition of *Laughin' Boy* by Bradley Denton (published by Subterranean Press). Second prize will receive advance reading copies of three forthcoming novels. Any runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to *F&SF*. Results of Competition 70 will appear in the December 2005 issue.

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MISCELLANEOUS

William Gibson: No Maps for These Territories, a documentary by Mark Neale: *www.docurama.com*

Alpha, the Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Workshop for Young Writers (ages 14-19) will be held at the University of Pittsburgh's Greensburg Campus July 6-15, 2005 in conjunction with Pittsburgh's SF convention, Confluence, July 15-17th. *Http://alpha.spellcaster.org/*

If stress can change the brain, all experience can change the brain. *http://www.undoingstress.com*

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CURIOSITIES

JOG RUMMAGE, BY GRAHAME WRIGHT (1974)

JOG Rummage. The name of a place, or a peculiar kind of bake sale? Not so. Jog Rummage is our hero, a hedgehog. Along with the Rats, the Jogs occupy a strange and eerie landscape: their world is capped by Shadow, divided into two kingdoms by a narrow "sea," lit only by a Moon and a Great Star, and infested with deadly Swoops. Rummage is a poet and scholar. When war with the egregious Rats arrives, he plays his part, helping to cement a peace known as the New Existence afterwards. But the world of Jog Rummage is about to undergo a shattering cataclysm, under the feet of the monster, Horribilis.

Elizabeth Morgan is a freakishly imaginative crippled youngster living with her equally damaged father. Obsessed with the mysterious past that has led to her father's blighted condition, Elizabeth frequents a patch of rubble-filled ground where her father's business once stood. Intrigued by a hole leading into the Earth, Elizabeth descends on an Orphic odyssey.

How these two scenarios mesh forms the essential mystery of this first—and apparently only—novel by Grahame Wright. The solution's not much of a shocker, but the readability of the book — published when Wright was only twenty-seven—remains high, thanks to its fusion of Tolkien and Peake. Toss in Jog Rummage's classic and climactic conceptual breakthrough for a stefnal flavor, and we mourn the fact that Wright seemingly abandoned fiction, despite the book's dustjacket claim that he was working on a second novel.

—Paul Di Filippo

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In memoriam

ANDRE NORTON

1912-2005

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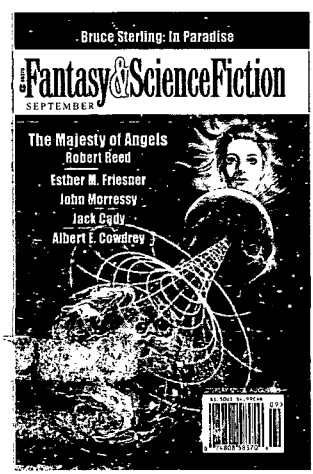

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